Fashioning Cultural Equity

A study of the materials, practices, products and consumers of fashion company Afriek

Nora Veerman
Abstract | keywords

In today’s globalising world, cultural differences are often exacerbated and exploited for commercial purposes. Recently, various transnational fashion companies have arisen that aim to soothe such cultural tensions, establishing cross-cultural dialogue through the production of fashion. This thesis explores how one of such companies, Afriek, may bridge cultural differences through the production of garments made of African kitenge cloth, in a cross-cultural collaboration between The Netherlands and Rwanda. In this study, the company is regarded not as a homogenous, profit-directed entity, but as a complex network of mutually affective human and non-human actors. Through a material culture study of kitenge and ethnographic interviews with Afriek’s team and consumers, their encounters and interactions are located. These are analysed with Homi Bhabha’s concepts of Third Space and cultural hybridity, concepts that challenge cultural binaries. In a transnational and cross-cultural journey past Afriek’s materials, practices, products and consumers, this thesis positions Afriek as a company that productively and affirmatively engages with existing cultural diversity through fashion.

Keywords
Fashion, cultural difference, fashion company, transnationalism, materiality, materialism, affectivity, agency, Third Space, cultural hybridity, African print cloth, kitenge, fashion production, fashion consumption.

Image on cover: a lookbook image of Afriek’s Spring 2018 collection. Photo by Tomek Dersu Aaron, image courtesy of Afriek.
Acknowledgements

After eight months of transnational and cross-cultural research, I have many a transnational and cross-cultural debt to owe.

First of all, I wish to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Louise Wallenberg, for her visionary reviews of my texts, her eagle eye for details and for her inspiring and encouraging words during our many facetime calls between Sweden and the Netherlands. Thanks also to my classmates at the Department of Fashion Studies for two amazing years together. I am so proud of us.

I am very grateful to Sivan Breemhaar for letting me into the world of Afriek, for always making time for my countless questions, and for listening as well as answering. I have come to admire her creativity and astuteness. Many thanks to all my respondents, for their time and their openness, and for many wonderful conversations. I owe a great debt to Jan-Willem and Gerry, who generously let me stay in their house in Kigali during my month of research in the city. After days of conducting interviews, their house was a comfortable haven and their presence a pleasure. Thanks also to Janvier and Haruna, for taking such good care of me.

To my amazing family, thank you for your unconditional love and support and many healthy laughter fits. Finally, Jim, thank you for buying me that shrimp kitenge and for always, always being there with me – whether near or far.
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Tourists, pilgrims, refugees, nomads, diasporans – they are figurations of a world that is growing progressively global and in which border-crossings can become a way of life. Yet, despite or perhaps because of the increasingly open, diversified and multicultural character of today’s societies, discrimination continues to thrive. Cultural diversity may be celebrated in public discourse, but as long as difference is only celebrated within the logic of capitalism and profit-making, it merely serves as a politically correct gift-wrap for consumerism. This is ardently so in fashion, where diversity makes it to headlines and advertisements while behind the screens, cultural exploitation continues to abound. At the same time, fashion designers casually draw visual inspiration for their collections from cultures near and far, projecting a hybrid view of the world which, instead of being accepted, spurs questions of cultural ownership.

Seen against this backdrop, fashion company Afriek occupies a precarious position in-between countries, continents, and cultures. Afriek – its name is a Dutch phonetic spelling of the French Afrique – was founded in 2013 by Dutch entrepreneurs Kars Gerrits and Sivan Breemhaar. The company’s atelier is located in Rwanda, where a small number of tailors constructs Afriek’s collections of men’s and womenswear, ranging from suits and shirts to trousers and trench coats, from colourful kitenge fabrics. Kitenge is the East-African umbrella term for various types of brightly printed cloth that circulate throughout the African continent. The variety of kitenge used by Afriek is derived from African wax print cloth, characterised by bold figurative or geometric patterns. Most of Afriek’s garments are shipped to the Netherlands, where they are popular with a variegated audience.

Afriek could easily become a bull’s eye of cultural ownership debate. African prints have recurred on European catwalks repeatedly in the past decades, and companies have been called out for it. However, instead of exacerbating or exploiting cultural differences, Afriek means to bridge cultures through fashion. The Afriek website describes the company’s project as follows:

1 For example, Stella McCartney was accused of cultural appropriation because of her use of Ankara fabrics (a type of African print fabrics) in her Spring-Summer 2018 collection. See Jamie Feldman, “Stella McCartney Accused of Cultural Appropriation for Using Ankara Prints In Her Spring Collection.” Huffington Post, October 10, 2017.
We started Afriek because we believe that ideas about Africa have been biased for too long. It is our mission to change those prevailing perspectives through equal collaboration with all our partners, creating colorful, high-end fashion. […] We often confuse our differences for justification of superiority and act according to our assumed (superior) position and knowledge. Through exchanging thoughts we can grow our understanding of each other and begin to learn, changing the persisting status quo.²

For Afriek, African print fashion is an apparatus for cultural difference politics. Building a bridge of colourful cloth, Afriek reaches out to both sides of the cultural divide, encouraging encounters in the middle.

More of such bridges are under construction. The rise of Afriek is part of a larger cropping up of ethical transnational fashion companies aiming to establish a cross-cultural dialogue. Yevu, Kitenge, Daily Paper, Rhumaa, Oseiduro and Maison Chateau Rouge are notable examples working between Africa and the west.³ They hold a crucial tenet in common: the acknowledgement of textiles and fashion as central sites where issues of cultural identity are articulated and negotiated. While these companies present new ways of global collaboration in fashion, they also indirectly propose new ways of living together in a multicultural world where different cultural identities come physically and virtually closer to each other every day.

Until now, little research has been conducted about such companies. However, the current situation begs for a closer look at these initiatives which engages not only with today’s transnational condition but also with the changing identities and subjectivities implied by it. Notably, feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti has argued that globalisation should go hand in hand with a more open-ended conception of the subject which relates in a different, more affective way to the environment that surrounds it: to other people, other animals, and the biosphere at large.⁴ Moreover, in the light of this thesis, in which textiles and garments play a central role, it seems suitable to demand specific attention for the affective

³ By the specificity of its transnational location and of the actors involved in Afriek, I do not presume that Afriek could easily compare to the other transnational and cross-cultural fashion companies which I have listed above, so it is difficult to draw conclusions about the phenomenon in general. However, I do believe that research into such companies should start with a micro-scale view to present a potential framework of research. I hope that this study will spur research into similar companies in the near future.
relations between humans and things; political theorist Jane Bennett’s notion of ‘vibrant matter’ can be of guidance here.\textsuperscript{5}

With Braidotti and Bennett, it becomes possible to envision Afriek as a network of culturally different human and non-human actors, notably, cloth, the company team, and the company’s consumers. This thesis explores how such actors may relate to ‘each-other’ in the context of Afriek. The interactions between these actors are studied through ethnographic research. Besides exploring the nature of these interactions, this thesis considers their effects on wider perceptions and understandings of cultural difference with cultural theorist Homi Bhabha’s writings on the production and negotiation of culture, specifically, his concepts of Third Space and cultural hybridity.\textsuperscript{6} These concepts enable us to see cross-cultural interactions as the very instances in which bridges are built.

**Research questions**

In line with the future-oriented character of Afriek’s practice and of the philosophical theories applied in this thesis, the central question of this thesis is constructive and affirmative: how may a company like Afriek bridge cultural differences? This question is proper on both a macro and a micro scale. On the one hand, it is an urgent question for the future of fashion and for the world at large; on the other hand, it offers a framework for the analysis of this company in particular which allows us to study what Afriek does, what processes and relations shape its project, and finally, how Afriek may reach its own goal.

In this thesis, the company is envisioned as more than just the sum of its production practices. Instead, Afriek is conceptualised as a combination of the material it engages with, its company team, and the consumers it sells its products to, whose presences mutually affect each other. A separate chapter is dedicated to each of these three (sets of) actors. In each chapter, the same questions will be addressed: what characterises these actors, and how may they affect and be affected by the other actors implicated in Afriek? These questions are aimed at positioning the different actors in the multitude of cross-cultural interactions that Afriek’s project gives rise to, in order to analyse these interactions and investigate how they inform the company’s attempt at bridging cultural differences.


\textsuperscript{6} Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
Theoretical framework: affective subjectivities

Transnationalism and its subjects: Aihwa Ong and Rosi Braidotti

To frame Afriek’s project, it is necessary to dig deeper into the specific transnational context in which Afriek acts, the consequences this has for its actors as subjects and their mutual relations. To argue that the bridging of cultural differences is possible at all, there exists a need to move away from the humanist idea of the subject as unitary, a subject which defines itself in opposition to an ‘other’, in short, from oppositional thinking as a predication of subjectivity in the first place.\(^7\) Moreover, the idea of a ‘knowing’ human subject in full control of itself and the world can impossibly continue to prevail in the light of the larger role that matter comes to play in our lives – whether as the heaps of debris we cannot seem to get rid of, or as the emotional relations we cherish with our possessions as ‘homes away from home’. Appropriately, in today’s transnational context of flexibility and flows, anthropologist Aihwa Ong and Braidotti have developed a subjectivity made of multiple interconnections.

Ong defined transnationality in 1999 with respect to culture as “the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space”.\(^8\) Ong underlines the prefix *trans-* in transnationalism, which emphasises the presence of borders that must necessarily precede their being crossed.\(^9\) This aspect distinguishes transnationalism from globalism, which is directed towards global homogenisation and the erasure of borders altogether.\(^10\) At the same time, it has consequences for subjectivity and identity.\(^11\) In a time of global intermixture, these can no longer be defined by clear-cut relations to a country or culture. According to Ong, transnationalism comes with a new sort of citizenship: flexible citizenship, Ong writes, “emphasize[s], and [is] regulated by, practices favouring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments and cultural regimes”.\(^12\)

Braidotti has evolved Ong’s flexible citizen into the notion of the nomadic subject. A ‘nomadic subject’, as she calls it, need not physically move per se, yet is permanently ‘under way’ to one of its multiple belongings. Instead of arriving at new or other identifications, the

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\(^7\) This type of dualistic, oppositional thinking, according to Braidotti, is what has caused global imbalances: “In the European history of philosophy [...] difference has been predicated on relations of domination and exclusion, to be different-from came to mean to be ‘less than’ or to be worth less than. Difference has been colonized by power relations that reduce it to inferiority”. Difference stands on one side of an oppositional logic that supports use of difference for hegemonic purposes. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 138.


\(^11\) Ibid., 3.

\(^12\) Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 6; Rosi Braidotti, “On Flexible Citizenship”, lecture at BAK (Basis voor Actuele Kunst), Utrecht (NL), November 1, 2019.
nomadic subject is continuously transgressing, metamorphosing, connecting, moving on, *becoming* – without a clear purpose.\(^\text{13}\) However, the nomadic subject is not unfamiliar with frontiers: “Nomadism is not fluidity without borders but an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries.”\(^\text{14}\) After all, one does need borders in order to transgress – these borders just need not necessarily be stable.

The idea of nomadic subjectivity is built on the idea of a non-unitary subject. In a return to the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, Braidotti asks for acknowledgement of the nature of the subject as not-one, as ‘split’ into consciousness and desire. Subjects, she argues, are not mere mind; they are also material. As they are embodied, they are sensible to desire and affect, and therefore are to some extent constituted through flows of encounters and interactions with others. Such a notion of the subject, itself anchored in alterity, radically defies binary thinking.\(^\text{15}\)

How to translate such a subject position to everyday experience? In *Transpositions*, Braidotti answers rather abstractly the question of how to actually relate, as nomadic subjects, to the bodies that we surround ourselves with, and which affect our own. For Braidotti, the answer is a sense of ‘global interconnectedness’ within the earth as a biosphere. Undoubtedly, she states, “we are in this together” – yet the point is to find empowering definitions for ‘we’ and ‘this’, in which “the challenge is not to return to fixed identities, clear boundaries and an allegedly pure past but rather to grab the opportunities offered by the cultural intermixture already available [...] so as to create yet unknown possibilities for bonding and community building”.\(^\text{16}\) However, what this ‘grabbing of opportunities’ involves exactly, Braidotti leaves in the dark. Might Afriek embody such an enterprise?

According to Braidotti, certainly not: “[P]ossibilities for bonding and community building”, she argues, must be strictly non-profit in order to be sustainable and resist being ‘eaten’ by the capitalist system.\(^\text{17}\) However, such an argument diminishes the political potential of any company, including Afriek, which must necessarily make profit in order to

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\(^{14}\) This statement contains an argument against charges of relativism associated with the idea of fluidity. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 66.

\(^{15}\) Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*.


\(^{17}\) Braidotti, *Transpositions*. 
exist. Braidotti’s conception of profit-making overlooks that Afriek also facilitates a multitude of cross-cultural encounters and, moreover, produces garments that we envelop ourselves in as human beings and which undoubtedly affect us.

**Vibrant matter: Jane Bennett**

How to consider cloth(es) within Braidotti’s affective framework? Fabrics and clothes unquestionably *do* something to us as human beings: think of the way a garment can make one feel confident, or how a sagging sock can cause discomfort and irritation. In the same way, specific knowledge of a fabric or garment – its association to personal memories, places, or other people – makes a garment more than mere material, and may impact the experience of wearing it. Designers, too, have a complicated relation with their fabrics, which can sometimes work against them. The question of cloth(es) and affect is often overlooked, but it demands consideration in relation to Afriek, for which kitenge is more than just cloth, and for which clothes are more than just fashion.

In theorising the role of kitenge and the garments of Afriek throughout this thesis, Bennett’s theory of the vitality of inorganic matter, or *vibrant matter*, can be applied. Her view is based on Spinoza’s, who wrote in his *Ethics*: “Any thing whatsoever, whether it be more perfect or less perfect, will always be able to persist in existing with that same force whereby it begins to exist, so that in this respect all things are equal.” Bennett interprets ‘any thing’ quite literally: for Bennett, this vitality is inherent to *any* material – that of human bodies as much as that of a plastic glove, oak pollen, a dead rat, a plastic bottle cap, a stick of wood. Bennett translates this vitality of things as “the capacity of things not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”

For Bennett, matter, too, can be an actor, a source of action. She acknowledges that there might be differences between human and thingly actors, but quoting cultural theorist John Frow, she argues that these differences need

18 As Kars, co-founder of Afriek, expressed: “In order for a company to endure, it has to make profit. […] I think a sustainable company is one that does not set profit as its primary aim. It was never our primary aim”. Interview with Kars, April 15, 2019.


20 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

21 Ibid., viii.
to be flattened, read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being. It’s a feature of our world that we can and do distinguish [...] things from persons. But the sort of world we live in makes it constantly possible for these two sets of kinds to exchange properties.22

Finally, Bennett remarks that no ‘single thing’ ever truly acts alone: “[I]ts efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces”.23 Following Spinoza, Bennett states that bodies are always “affecting and being affected by other bodies”; moreover, that every body is itself an assemblage of other human and non-human bodies, all of them vital and affective in themselves.24 With Bennett, it becomes possible to read both kitenge and Afriek’s garments as actors that have a vital impact on the other actors with whom they interact. As these actors engage in conversation with each other, Afriek slowly becomes engulfed in a sea of chatter between things and people – all speaking slightly different languages.

Methodology
How to make sense of this chatter? The overarching structure of this thesis is directed by Arjun Appadurai’s hypothesis that things have ‘social lives’ of their own – and that their being a commodity only constitutes a phase within a much longer lifespan.25 In this thesis, “it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context”, in short, things will take us past places and people.26 The social lives of Afriek’s products stretch all the way from the history of their material, kitenge, across the drawing paper of Afriek’s designers, through the hands of Afriek’s tailors in the Kigali atelier, past the production manager performing the quality check, to consumers that buy and wear these garments. For clarity, this path is divided into three chapters, on kitenge, company, and consumers respectively.

Once the path is outlined, the question remains how to appropriately account for the things and people engaged with each other in the network that is Afriek. While both can be

23 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 21.
24 This reminds us of Braidotti’s nomadic subject, which is ‘different within’. Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 22, 28.
25 Appadurai explains the ‘commodity phase’ of a thing as follows: “The commodity situation in the social life of any thing be defined as the situation which its exchangeability (past, present or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature.” Arjun Appadurai, The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective. Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 2003 [1986]), 13.
said to ‘speak’, the first obviously does not have a voice. Therefore, the chapter on kitenge requires a different method than the second and third chapter, which involve human actions and utterances. For the first chapter, kitenge will be subjected to a material culture study, while for the second and third chapter ethnographic methods will be applied, specifically semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. Finally, this material will be analysed with Bhabha’s notions of Third Space and hybridity. This analysis takes the form of a dialogue between philosophy and human experience. While philosophical theory may function as critical lens through which to look at everyday life, human experience may explain complex philosophical theories and assess their practical value.

Making textiles talk

The first chapter of this thesis attempts to outline the social life of kitenge fabrics, answering the question what kitenge is and where it speaks from. In this chapter, kitenge is analysed as an (affective form of) material culture. Following Giorgio Riello, this means that kitenge is approached as the result of certain historical circumstances, yet at the same time acts as a transformative instigator of new (hi)stories and theories. A material culture study connects the visual and material with social and historical context, in this case, that of the historical trajectory of kitenge itself. This has defined not only what kitenge looks like, but also what meanings are generated along the way. In this chapter, Bennett’s notion of vibrant matter returns to underline the agency of kitenge.

The materials for this material culture study come from multiple places. While literature on kitenge as an East-African phenomenon and on fashion and dress in Rwanda remains scarce today, there is ample literature on the specific type of kitenge that Afriek uses, derived from African wax print fabrics. The first chapter of this thesis presents an overview and analysis of this literature. Wherever gaps in literature occur, attempts will be made to fill these with a rough weave of documentary material, oral histories and analysis of several archival photographs.

Considering the company

The second chapter of this thesis studies Afriek as a company in the narrow sense: as the sum of a number of people, practices, policies and representations that accompany the production of its garments. The aim is to analyse multiple aspects of Afriek’s project of bridging cultural

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difference through fashion and to mark how it is affected by people and materials in the process. My original intention was to explore these matters through a series of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with team members of Afriek, and during one month of participatory observation at the Afriek atelier in Kigali. Sivan, the current company owner, accepted my request to conduct participatory observation at the Afriek atelier in Kigali in the winter of 2019. The design and production of Afriek’s sixth collection was planned for February 2019, and the atelier was expected to be bustling like a beehive.

Unfortunately, in December 2018, I was informed by Sivan that Afriek would not be producing a new collection that winter, the cause of which is outlined in the epilogue of this thesis. Be that as it may, these developments had major consequences for this research project. The atelier remained open, but only for business-to-business assignments and individual orders. Participatory observation became nearly useless, as the new situation was far from representative of the former. Instead, I decided to develop a reconstruction of Afriek’s working processes based on interviews with Afriek’s team members: the company owners, designers, production manager, three tailors, and the company’s brand ambassador in Rwanda [fig. 1].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sivan</td>
<td>Company co-founder and owner</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kars</td>
<td>Company co-founder and previous owner</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jolanda</td>
<td>Previous designer</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stéphane</td>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>French-Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Brand ambassador</td>
<td>Rwandan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Rwandan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Bosco</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Burundian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Rwandan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Production manager</td>
<td>Rwandan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Names, roles and nationalities of Afriek’s team members interviewed between January and May 2019.

Ethnographic observation would have been a suitable method, as it allows the researcher to study the seemingly trivial processes that signify human or human-material relations as well as disseminations of power and agency within the company. As Kerry Howell has written, through participatory observation, the researcher establishes a bond of trust between oneself and observants, which allows the researcher a close-up perspective without significantly impacting the conduct of observants during the research process. Kerry Howell, *An introduction to the philosophy of methodology* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), 124.
Sivan generously put me in touch with all people involved. The interviews each took place in person. Each team member was asked several fixed questions about their work at Afriek, their role in the company, their working methods, their interactions with other team members and working with kitenge cloth. The interviews lasted between approximately ten minutes and, in several cases, one and a half hours. This was not based on the number of questions but on the length of answers and the more open-ended conversations that I engaged in with the team members during our encounters.

Further impressions of Afriek’s practices and policies could be derived from the company’s social media pages and its website, which are virtual archives containing images and texts from previous years. Moreover, these texts and images represent Afriek’s products and practices to its consumers and are therefore important in understanding consumers’ perceptions of Afriek. For the sake of compactness, I have chosen not to study the images produced by Afriek, as written representations of Afriek’s practices communicate the company’s intentions and practices more concretely. An analysis of the company’s visual representations might be taken up in a later study.

**Wearing Afriek**

The third chapter of this thesis considers Afriek garments as they are worn by Afriek’s customers. This part, too, was explored by means of a series of one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews about customers’ experiences with interpreting, buying and wearing their Afriek clothes. Although most of Afriek’s customers live in the Netherlands, Afriek has several customers in Rwanda as well. Five Afriek customers were interviewed in Rwanda, and six in The Netherlands [fig. 2]. I found four Dutch customers by posting a message on my personal Facebook page; the fifth was Afriek’s current designer; a sixth customer, I met at a talk show hosted by Afriek in January 2019. The sixth was. The result of this sampling method was a sample varied in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. However, most of the respondents came from my own network and I knew three of them personally. The sample was thus not exactly representative of Afriek’s customer base in the Netherlands.

The respondents in Rwanda also differed in age, gender and ethnicity, as many customers of Afriek in Rwanda turned out to be expats. I was introduced to them randomly, by Sivan and by Joseph, Afriek’s production manager. Although this sample may have been somewhat more representative, it was still relatively small and could therefore impossibly cover the full range of Afriek’s customers in Rwanda. However, this thesis relies on the quality rather than the quantity of interviews; personal narratives are more important than a
complete – and generalised – representation of experiences.\textsuperscript{29} Like the interviews with Afriek’s company team, the consumer interviews were conducted face-to-face. Every consumer was asked several questions about when, where and why they bought their Afriek items, their knowledge about the company and its products, and their experiences of wearing their Afriek garments. Interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one and a half hours.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Misha</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorena</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bas</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margje</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hervé</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippine</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
</tr>
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<td>Eliza</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thijs</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stéphane</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2. Names, ages, genders and countries of residence of the Afriek consumers interviewed between January and March 2019.

Finally, in the light of the cultural ownership debate, I wanted to include an ‘outsider perspective’ on Afriek from people whose cultural heritage – kitenge – the company appropriates, and who are affected by Afriek’s project as such, but do not necessarily support its cause. For this purpose, I contacted the chair of the organisation of the Rwandan community in Amsterdam. He put me in touch with four Dutch-Rwandan respondents, with whom I conducted twenty-minute semi-structured interviews about Afriek and their own experiences with kitenge [fig. 3]. The interviews with these respondents turned out to be very helpful in filling a gap in scholarship on the history of kitenge and fashion and dress in Rwanda. I was able to draw from the respondents’ memories of buying and wearing kitenge in Rwanda up to the year 2000 to construct part of this history.

\textsuperscript{29} It must be noted that there is some overlap between Afriek’s team members and the company’s consumers. Both Rita, Afriek’s brand ambassador in Rwanda, and Stéphane, the company’s menswear designer, were customers of Afriek before they started working at the company. While their double position may have coloured their views on the company and on the meaning of their products, their ‘insider knowledge’ of Afriek made them more reflective on their buying and wearing of Afriek garments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender M/V/Other</th>
<th>Lived in Rwanda until</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>62</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giselle</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cedric</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marie-Louise</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>V</td>
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Fig. 3. Names, ages, genders and years of moving to the Netherlands of members of the Rwandan diaspora in the Netherlands interviewed in April and May 2019.30

In the analysis of the interviews, I will focus on the interactions between cloth, company and consumers, both in terms of enunciation and interpretation, and tie different utterances to ideas of cultural identity and subjectivity. To find how these interactions informed a bridging of cultural differences, I will analyse them with Bhabha’s concepts of hybridity and Third Space, which may help shed a light on the structure and effects of the interactions taking place between the different cultural actors involved with Afriek.

Analytical concepts for cross-cultural encounters: Homi Bhabha

To criticise the binary view of cultural differences present in society today, scholars regularly apply the critical concept of a ‘third term’, or the place where interactions between cultures cause the production of new and hybrid cultural forms, which simultaneously shows that neither of the two anterior cultures is stable, authentic or historically rooted. Such an idea of a third term was developed by postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson, based on the psychoanalysis of Lacan, and has been advanced by Bhabha in his seminal work The Location of Culture.31 The reason that Bhabha’s discussion of this third term – or Third Space, as he calls it – is so useful to the analysis of Afriek in this thesis, is because Bhabha meticulously explains the way in which a cultural interaction may, through such a Third Space, produce cultural hybridity. Bhabha’s theories thus provide a useful tool for analysis of the cross-cultural encounters happening within Afriek.32

30 Several of these respondents wished to remain anonymous. For the sake of consistency, I have anonymized all four respondents’ names.


32 It has to be noted that Bhabha’s notions of Third Space and cultural hybridity were part of his radical post-colonialist theorising. However, his concepts also hold value for critiques of contemporary cases of dualist thinking. Notwithstanding, discussing Afriek with radical postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha must be done with caution. This combination may, after all, provoke readers to think of the subjects involved with Afriek in terms of ‘colonisers’ and ‘colonised’. This is by no means the intention of this linkage.
Any such cross-cultural interaction, for Bhabha, is a dialogue between *enunciations* of culture. Indeed, for Bhabha, culture *is* not; culture *is spoken*; it is part language system and part performance, the situated moment of utterance. This process of enunciation introduces a split between the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference, and the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance.\(^\text{33}\)

In short, this “enunciative split” happens at the point where the specific conditions of the articulation in the performative present cross with the general conditions of language as a stable system of reference.\(^\text{34}\)

If a specific iteration never exactly chimes with what we trust to be a generic system of meaning, it follows that there always exists an ambivalence in interpretation. The meanings generated in communication can never be entirely homogeneous or transparent among the subjects participating in this communication. Bhabha writes: “The act of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passing through a Third Space.”\(^\text{35}\) This Third Space, according to Bhabha, “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew”.\(^\text{36}\)

The concept of such a Third Space severely challenges the historical notion of culture as a stable and homogenizing force. It is in this instability of culture that the potential for culture’s hybridity opens up: “Third Space [...] might open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity”.\(^\text{37}\) For this process, Bhabha repeatedly uses the metaphor of the bridge, a metaphor that returns in Africk’s own web discourse.\(^\text{38}\) The building of a bridge or Third Space requires the localisation of tensions

\(^\text{33}\) Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 51.

\(^\text{34}\) This reminds us of Braidotti’s ‘split subject’; indeed, both Bhabha and Braidotti build their notion of the subject on the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan.

\(^\text{35}\) Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 53.

\(^\text{36}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^\text{37}\) It has to be noted that, other than advocating a hybrid culturality – “we are all the same in the end!” – Bhabha uses the concept of cultural hybridity to defy oppositional thinking. Ibid., 56.

\(^\text{38}\) Bhabha equates the production of cultural hybridity with “the intervention of the ‘beyond’ that establishes a boundary: a bridge, [which] captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the
and ambivalences in interpretation that intervene with the idea of culture as stable and homogenous.

**Reflection on research methods**

It must be noted that Afriek as object of research, in providing a bridge from the Netherlands to Africa, has enabled me to research African fashion and textiles as a white, European subject. It is crucial to reflect on this position, especially when conducting cross-cultural, qualitative research. Quite remarkably, many other white, European researchers working on the same topic, have not been so reflective. For example, Nina Sylvanus conducted fieldwork on African print cloth in Togo over a period of ten years, but does not elaborate on her own position as a white European woman in relation to her Togolese respondents in the resulting publication.\(^3^9\) This does not only render her own research somewhat opaque to the reader, but also leaves other researchers with questions of how to negotiate their own position on the border.

My position in relation to the respondents affected my research process as well as the outcomes. With several of the interviewees, who were born and raised in the Netherlands, I shared a common experiential framework. However, with others, who grew up on the African continent and currently live in Rwanda or the Netherlands, this was not the case. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed engagement into open conversation about my own and the respondents’ lives, which established a bond of trust, helped to contextualise respondents’ choices and experiences, and generally made the interviews more enjoyable.

Still, I was concerned that I might be considered to be intrusive on some points. For example, discussing respondents’ life histories in relation to cultural identity in some cases directed the conversation towards discussing the Rwandan genocide or other causes of respondents’ involuntary displacement. I was cautious to bring up these subjects, as I did not know how commonly respondents discussed them in daily life. I was afraid that by touching

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upon these topics I might provoke painful and disruptive memories in a situation dependent on mutual trust.

Moreover, in writing a thesis about cultural identities and hybridity, I write about a destabilisation of identities which might not be desirable to the same extent for all of the respondents, who might instead be seeking to assert cultural identities or feelings of cultural sameness and belonging. By discussing the history of kitenge fabrics beyond Africa or the wearing of kitenge garments by European people, I risked coming across as someone working to deconstruct other people’s cultural identities or heritage while leaving my own intact. In some cases, this sensitivity may have been to the detriment of my material. To the questions I did ask, respondents were never reluctant to answer; overall, talking about fashion turned out to be a pleasant and accessible way to discuss questions of identity.

Reflection is not only necessary in relation to ethnographic research, but also in relation to the practice of theorising. In his essay “The Commitment to Theory”, Bhabha argued that any theoretical practice is inevitably political: as a form of discourse, it “produce[s] rather than reflects [its] objects of reference […] it defines the social and makes it available as an objective of and for, action”. Attention should therefore go to what is represented within this discourse, and how it is represented. More concretely, as a researcher, by defining some people or things as African, Rwandan, Dutch or European, I simultaneously produce the categories that I might destabilise under the flag of cultural hybridity. I hope that any ‘label’ applied in this thesis will be seen in this light, and will be critically engaged with. Moreover, I hope to do justice to the self-identification of my respondents.

Previous research
This thesis builds on and extends the body of literature in three branches of research: cloth(es) and affectivity, the cross-cultural company, and the wearing of cultural difference.

Cloth(es) and affectivity
Until the late twentieth century, literature on fashion and textiles focused primarily on what they might represent, and to a lesser extent on what they might do. In an early attempt to challenge this view, Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider proposed that while cloth has representational capacities, it can equally evoke a sense of connectedness, both among

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40 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 32, 34. The essay “The Commitment to Theory” is the second chapter in The Location of Culture.
humans and between humans and material, and defines human experience. Since, the literature on cloth(es) and affectivity has taken two general directions: affect in relation to the dressing of the social body, and affectivity as a political quality of fashion that may transform or decentre the human body.

In the first category, Joanne Entwistle has argued that dressing is always a situated, embodied practice which defines the actions as well as the interpretations of the body in culture. Dressing creates an awareness of the body and is therefore inextricably connected to a human sense of self. This idea has been furthered by ethnographer Sophie Woodward, who has underlined the impact that the ‘feeling’ of clothes may have on our bodies, showing that ‘looking good’ is part ‘feeling right’, and the other way around. It follows that clothes define our position in social situations. In a later paper, she and Tom Fisher articulate more clearly the agency of cloth(es) as the ability to actively thwart the intentions of both wearers and designers. Finally, in relation to African prints, Nina Sylvanus has described the materiality of African wax fabrics as more technically affective, primarily through its visual qualities. Woodward’s and Sylvanus’ work underlines the necessity of ethnography to document the experiential relation between humans and cloth(es) in daily life.

More recently, the idea of cloth(ing) and affectivity has been developed in several more politically theoretical studies. Both Anneke Smelik and Steven Seely have explored material affect in relation to several specific examples of haute couture creations, such as Iris van Herpen’s. Smelik argues that this relation may cause a decentring of the subject, a dissolving of the binary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and simultaneously between the ‘same’ and the ‘other’. Similarly, Stephen Seely discusses how such garments may problematise dualisms between human bodies and things, human bodies and non-human bodies and humans and technology, where clothes become “transformative forces”.

46 Nina Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation.
While both directions of study hold value for this thesis, it is remarkable that the study of affectivity and textiles has fallen behind. Moreover, a connection between cloth(es), affectivity and cultural identity has not been made. In this thesis, I approach kitenge cloth and Afriek’s garments as vibrant matter. In doing so, I reintroduce textiles into the question of affectivity and agency. Moreover, by embedding these in a discussion of cultural difference and identity, I create a new framework for exploring the affectivity of cloth(es).

The cross-cultural company

Little research has been done about the transnational, cross-cultural fashion company. In what seems to be the only text on the topic until this day, Peter Jackson and Claire Dwyer analyse two British-Indian fashion companies: a high-street retailer “driven primarily by commercial imperatives” and a smaller company “commit[ted] to indigenous handmade production and a socially responsible attitude towards their workforce”, similar to Afriek.49 The authors explore the consequences of commodifying difference through a transnational, cross-cultural company, finding that such enterprises mostly construct and commercialise rather than engage with cultural difference. Jackson and Dwyer do study how consumers transform and negotiate the meanings of the clothes they buy from these companies, but do not divert from the companies’ interests to questions of consumers’ individual identity or subjectivity.50

There are, however, more texts on the commodification of ethnic identity by corporations in general. In Ethnicity Inc., John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff take charge with what they have called ‘ethnopreneurialism’. They are critical of the incentives of profit-making that cause multinational companies to appropriate ethnic signifiers, and ethnic minorities to ‘brand’ their culture. However, the Comaroffs also consider how these processes contribute to the self-identification and a strengthening sense of community among ethnic minorities.51 Rhoda Woets and Christine Delhaye outline a similar, although less sceptical, argument in their analysis of Vlisco fabrics as an example of commodified ethnicity in Africa.52 Lastly, Sylvanus discusses the commodification of ‘African’ wax print aesthetics

50 Dwyer and Jackson, “Commodifying difference”.
for a western market, arguing that western ‘cultural experts’ or ‘mediators’ authenticate simulacra of Africanity in order to adapt to western consumer demand.\footnote{Nina Sylvanus, “The Fabric of Africanity: Tracing the global threads of authenticity”, \textit{Anthropological Theory} 7, no. 2 (2007), 201-216;}

All contributions mentioned above discuss the company as a homogenous, one-directional entity and discuss materials and consumers as separate, non-affective bodies. This narrative would be benefited by both a more philosophical and experience-based perspective on cross-cultural companies, that focuses on interactions within the company, with consumers and with materials, and on the ‘effects’ of such ‘affects’ for identification.

\textit{Wearing cultural difference}

Few texts exist on the wearing of African print cloth or other markers of cultural difference by western people, whether in western countries or in expat communities. Kristyne Loughran has presented an overview and interpretation of the recurring appearance of African prints in European high fashion but does not discuss the actual buying and wearing of these clothes.\footnote{Kristyne Loughran, “The Idea of Africa in European High Fashion: Global Dialogues”, \textit{Fashion Theory} 13, no. 2 (2009), 243-271.}

In her article on the commodification of African wax print to a western audience, Sylvanus suggests that western consumers incorporate African print cloth into their cosmopolitan lifestyles, as a marker of fashionable distinction, but as the text is not based on ethnographic research, this argument is not entirely grounded.

A publication that is of relevance in describing the structures and effects of ‘wearing difference’ is perhaps Marjorie Garber’s book on transvestism, in which she argues that cross-dressing challenges binary notions of sex and gender. Garber discusses the creation of a ‘third term’, relatable to Bhabha’s Third Space, as the location of such a challenge. Contrary to the previously mentioned studies on the wearing of difference, which simply categorise wearing cultural difference as exoticism, Garber’s explores and engages with the wearing of difference in a western context and investigates its impact on dualistic thinking.\footnote{Marjorie Garber, \textit{Vested Interests: cross-dressing and cultural anxiety} (New York: Routledge, 1992).} While Sylvanus’ and Loughran’s texts offer points of departure for this thesis, a translation of Garber’s argument to the realm of cultural difference could be a point of arrival.

\textbf{Thesis outline}

In this thesis, the interactions that exist within the context of a company like Afriek are explored, and an attempt is made to answer the question how they inform Afriek’s project of
bridging cultural differences. The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter contains a material culture study of kitenge. With Bennett and Bhabha, its cultural and affective character is established, which will define its role within Afriek. In the second chapter, which is based on ethnographic research, the cross-cultural interactions among humans and between humans and material within Afriek as a company are analysed and tensions located in which a Third Space, or a bridging of cultures, may emerge. The last chapter focuses on Afriek’s customers, who interact with Afriek as a brand and its representations, as well as with the Afriek clothes they buy and wear. Finally, from this network of human and material interactions, I seek to entangle the significance of Afriek for a quickly globalizing world that celebrates yet cannibalises on cultural difference.
Chapter 1 | Kitenge matter(s)

Introduction
In Rwanda, the colourful cotton cloth that Afriek uses in its designs is unanimously referred to as ‘kitenge’ or ‘igitenge’. The term ‘kitenge’ comes from the Swahili word ‘kitengele’, which means piece of cloth or band of colour. The term kitenge covers multiple types of colourful West-African fabrics that are also worn in East-Africa, such as wax fabrics, Java and fancy prints, and Ghanaian kente cloth. Kitenge is worn mostly by women, who wrap lengths of it around their hips, chests or heads, use it as baby-sling, or have it tailored into fashionable silhouettes. In rare cases, men wear kitenge shirts or trousers. Some Rwandans refer to these fabrics and the wrap-like style of wearing it by its French name, pagne. Although French was long Rwanda’s second language as a consequence of Belgian colonialism, the name pagne probably travelled from West-Africa, together with its boldly coloured aesthetics.

Kitenge has come a long way, both spatially and temporally, before arriving in Rwanda. In an increasingly globalizing fashion world, it is still unremittingly on the move, continuously transforming throughout its travels. This chapter attempts to capture a part of the cloth’s complex social history, based on existing literature on West-African wax print fabrics, several photographs and the stories of Rwandan (ex-)citizens I spoke to during my fieldwork trip to Rwanda and after. In this story, two things unfold: kitenge’s historical multidirectional trajectories, embedded in (post)colonial relations and contemporary capitalist exchange networks; and the affective and agentive qualities of kitenge, which reveals itself as a vibrant assemblage of cross-cultural human and non-human agency – a Third Space of cultural interaction.

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57 Pagne translates to English as ‘wrapper’. This category of cloth is more broadly known as ‘African print fabric’. Nina Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation, 2. I will use the name pagne when referring to West-Africa and Congo and kitenge when referring to Rwanda and other East-African countries.
From wax to kitenge

The social history of Afriek’s kitenge begins with the development of wax print technique, derived from the proliferating tradition of batik production on the island of Java. Diffused from China and India to Japan and the Indonesian islands, its distinctive technique is said to have been perfected in Java during the thirteenth century. The procedure involves the dripping of hot, liquid wax on cotton cloth in elaborate patterns, by use of a small, pen-like cup [fig. 4]. The syllable ‘tik’ in ‘batik’ comes from the sound of wax dripping on the cloth.

The cloth would subsequently be dyed in a natural dye bath; the sections of the cloth covered with wax would remain undyed. The wax would be removed and applied on other parts of the cloth, and the cloth dipped into a second dye bath to create another layer of colour. This procedure could be repeated multiple times to create a double-sided, multi-coloured pattern.

The batik procedure was very labour-intensive and time-consuming. A highly valued craft, it was mostly worn by the Javanese upper class and by other Javanese at festive occasions.

Figs. 4 + 5. Women making batik in Dutch-East-India, 1912, and a portrait of a Javanese woman in batik, ca. 1890-1910. Photos by O. Kurkdjian and Kassian Céphas, images courtesy of Rijksmuseum.

occasions [fig. 5]. Its immense popularity did not go unnoticed by European traders operating in the area. During the first half of the nineteenth century, batik became increasingly desirable for European consumers. At the same time, several British, Swiss and Dutch entrepreneurs saw potential in exporting a cheaper, machine-made version of batiks back to the British and Dutch East Indies, in order to profit from the enthusiasm for textiles in the region. In 1854, Jean Baptiste Theodore Prévinaire, founder of a cotton production factory in Haarlem, the Netherlands, managed to develop a machine for mechanically printing imitation batiks, called La Javanaise. Made from a transformed banknote printing machine, La Javanaise printed resin-resist on cloth, two sides at the same time. The result looked like wax print, but it was faster and cheaper to produce. The development of similar imitation machines soon followed.

However, the market for machine-printed cottons in Indonesia, which had aroused such high expectations among the European entrepreneurs, turned out to be meagre. The Indonesians rejected the cottons. The reasons for this are still contested, but three major reasons return, aptly summed up by Sylvanus. First, the resin used in the mechanical process cracked when it dried, causing thin crackle lines in the dye. Second, the resin was challenging to remove, leaving tiny spots on the fabric. Third, additional colours were often applied by hand-blocking to prevent extra dyeing efforts, but doing so with precision is difficult – so the colours were often not aligned with the pattern of the cloth. These characteristics were dismissed by the Indonesians as “faulty workmanship” – but would later gain appreciation among West-Africans for their dynamic effect.

While most companies backed out from the production of machine-made batiks, Prévinaire and his Haarlem Cotton Company kept producing, predominantly for the Dutch

62 Java only became a formal colony of The Netherlands by 1866; before, it was an important trade destination for the Dutch VOC (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, transl. United East-Indian Company). India was a British colony from the 1820s. Switzerland engaged in active trade with India. Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation, 56-57; Nielsen, History and development of wax-printed textiles, 36; Christine Delhaye, “The Production of African Wax Cloth in a Neoliberal Global Market: Vlisco and the Processes of Imitation and Appropriation”, in Fashion and Postcolonial Critique, ed. Elke Gagele and Monica Titton, (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2019), 250.
65 Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation, 59.
In 1893, Scottish trading actor Ebenezer Brown Fleming reported to Prévinaire that West-Africans were in fact very fond of Prévinaire’s cottons. Prévinaire consequently started producing for Brown Fleming. Prévinaire and Brown Fleming’s prints embarked on the Manchester trade route to the Gold Coast, then a British colony. Here, the Indian printed cottons that the British Empire had exported to the Gold Coast for years in exchange for slaves, had become looked upon as mundane. In a Simmelian manner, West-African consumers sought a source of novelty, which the mechanically produced wax-prints offered. The random speckles and crackles on the wax print fabric, as well as the slightly displaced fields of colour, made every piece of wax print cloth characteristically unique and imbued it with a vividness which was relished on the Gold Coast. Sylvanus attributes the cloth’s affectivity to this sensorial effect: “The visual force as well as the energetically charged and pulsating quality of the pattern make the cloth vibrant in such a way that it captivates the eye (processed as a dizzying cognition) and stimulates viewers’ imaginations.”

Meanwhile, Vlisco had entered the scene. Founded in 1846 by Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen, the company exported Java prints – one-sided imitation batiks, of inferior quality – to the West-African coast, where the Dutch had a trading post. It was only in the early twentieth century that Vlisco began producing resin-resist prints that could compete with those of the Haarlem Cotton Company. Shortly after the First World War, the Haarlem Cotton Company collapsed as a result of financial problems. Vlisco, a wealthy family company, was quick to buy up its designs. Vlisco’s Dutch designers attempted to adapted these further to suit the West-African taste. They drew inspiration from African artefacts in the Dutch ethnographic museums and from West-African proverbs. None of them ever went to West-Africa; to assess whether their fantastical prints would sell in practice, they depended

67 Nielsen, History and development of wax-printed textiles, 36-37.
69 At this point, an active textile production and trade had already existed in West-Africa for centuries. The trade in Indian printed cottons through the British Empire serves as a relevant predecessor of and model for the trade in imitation batiks. See Paulette Young, “Ghanaian Woman and Dutch Wax Prints: The Counter-appropriation of the Foreign and the Local Creating a New Visual Voice of Creative Expression”, Journal of Asian and African Studies 2016 51, no. 3 (2016), 310-311; Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation, 49-63; Nielsen, History and development of wax-printed textiles, 22; Delhaye, “The Production of African Wax Cloth”, 250.
70 Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation, 68. As Sylvanus points out, it is interesting to note that while Georg Simmel considered the quest for novelty and differentiation to be the core of the Western fashion system, it was of great concern in West-Africa at this time. Georg Simmel, “Fashion”, American Journal of Sociology 1 (1957), 542-558.
71 Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation, 61.
72 Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation, 11.
heavily on the feedback of West-African textile merchants and traders who communicated local tastes and trends.

These merchants and traders were often women, nicknamed ‘Nana Benz’, with Benz being a reference to these women’s wealth, authority and power. Apart from occupying central trade positions, these women also allotted the final Vlisco designs their specific names, derived from proverbs, metaphors, socio-cultural symbols or mainstream media. As a consequence, the textiles themselves became texts. The print called ‘Tu sors, je sors’ (You leave, I leave), for example, which is scattered with bird cages – some open, others closed – and birds in flight, refers to adultery: a woman wearing this print warns her husband about the consequences of being unfaithful to her [fig. 6]. Vlisco’s wax print are deeply embedded in West-African popular culture and social life as a wearable system of communication. In this sense, too, wax cloth ‘speaks’ to the human bodies that surround it. Its colours and patterns do not only enchant or shock the eye; they evoke memories of people, events, and sentiments.

Throughout the twentieth century, the popularity of pagne spread over West- and Central-African countries. For many Africans, it became synonymous with a sense of ‘Africanity’. In the years following the wave of decolonisation in Africa, multiple African leaders nominated pagne as national dress. Among these leaders was Joseph Mobutu, at that
time the president of Congo, then called the Republic of Zaïre, who stated that the pagne was ‘authentically’ and ‘traditionally’ African. This instance shows how far the pagne had come to travel – all the way from Ghana to the heart of Zaïre – and how much authority it had acquired along the way.

At the same time, the Africanity of wax print cloth appears before us as a construction, produced in a complex process of appropriations and re-appropriations between Java, the Netherlands, the British Empire, and West-Africa. Several authors have spoken of processes of ‘authentication’, a process constituted in the actions of designing, naming and wearing the prints. The previous story has illustrated that although “wax-print behaves at times as an ‘African’ object, belonging to an ‘African repertoire’”, the material is at the same deeply hybrid. What is considered ‘African’ is in fact itself a material fraught by internal differences that merely becomes fixed as ‘African’ by processes of authentication, within and outside of Africa.

The differences within
Wax print aesthetics, and pagne in general, obtained a pan-African status in the second half of the twentieth century, both on the continent itself and beyond. However, above story does not account for the arrival and popularity of pagne in a country as far from Ghana as Rwanda. Separated from West-Africa, the centre of wax prints, by the outstretched hinterlands of Congo, Rwanda has a different native language and culture. Current scholarship on African print fabrics seems to take the pan-African popularity of this cloth for granted. Much attention has been devoted to the difference between European and African cultures – and the bridging of them through textiles – but few scholars have recognised the differences within African culture. Tracing the arrival of kitenge fabrics in Rwanda is an attempt to acknowledge these differences and to explain how and why Rwandan citizens would embrace these textiles.

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77 Sylvanus, “The Fabric of Africanity”, 212. In fact, the century-old batik tradition which first appealed to the European traders was itself already hybrid heritage: Tunde Akinwumi has pointed out the amalgam of Indian, European Indonesian and Islamic motifs in batik designs. Akinwumi, “The African Print Hoax,” 181.
79 Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation; Kristyne Loughran, “The Idea of Africa in European High Fashion: Global Dialogues”, Fashion Theory 13, no. 2 (2009), 243-271. Vlisco wax prints, specifically, have been discussed with Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity by Bruggeman. Her article is a relevant precursor to this thesis, but Bruggeman’s scope is rather narrow and her application of Bhabha’s concepts neglects their (political) context and complexity, so I will not extend on it here. Bruggeman, “Vlisco”.
According to Michelle Wagner, in her contribution on Rwanda and Burundi in the *Berg Encyclopedia of Dress and Fashion*, African print fabrics, or kitenge, must have occurred in Rwanda during the time when the country was a Belgian colony (1916-1962). Wagner writes that kitenge was worn by middle-class citizens in the toga-like style of Rwandan traditional attire, called *mushanana*.\(^80\) After independence, it continued to be worn by middle-class citizens, usually wrapped around the body and sometimes combined with items of western clothing.\(^81\) However, Wagner does not mention the origin of these kitenges.

Considering their wax-print aesthetic, it is likely that they came from West-Africa. Amandine, a sixty-two-year-old Dutch-Rwandan woman who lived in Rwanda until 1994, remembered that kitenge came predominantly from Congo: “Some people would go to Congo, to work [...] when they returned, they would wear kitenge. But what I noticed was that not everybody would wear it. Mostly people from the border area, for example Bukavu [a Congolese town just across the South-Western border of Rwanda]”.\(^82\) Giselle (55), who moved to the Netherlands from Rwanda in 2000, mentioned that “when I was young, we would buy kitenge in Congo, in Bukavu, or in Goma”.\(^83\) It is likely that the wax-print like fabrics Amandine and Giselle referred to had arrived in eastern Congo through extensive movement of people throughout the country in the 1960s and 1970s, when Congo’s eastern provinces were increasingly exploited for mining.

Although Giselle and Amandine liked to wear the fabric during their years in Rwanda, it was not always accessible. Amandine: “[Kitenges] were really expensive. Wax Hollande, they were called then. Really expensive”.\(^84\) Giselle confirms: “In our time, they were for the high class, but it depended on the fabric and the silhouette. Someone who had a good silhouette and good quality [fabric], those were good clothes for the real high class”.\(^85\) Giselle and Amandine would, however, wear kitenge on festive occasions.

When I asked if the patterns had any specific meaning for them, they answered in the negative. Both said that they simply wore the fabric because they thought it looked very

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\(^{80}\) Wagner writes that the wearing of kitenge was “a continuation in the colonial period of the ‘Rwandan traditional styles’ that developed in the nineteenth century” and of which “the particulars of the fabric […] shifted with style changes. In general, the greater the means of the wearer and the formality of the situation, the lighter and more solid-colored the cloth”. An example of the ‘Rwandan traditional styles’ would probably be the toga-like mushanana. Michele D. Wagner, “Rwanda and Burundi”, in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Africa*, ed. Joanne B. Eicher and Doran H. Ross, 461-470. Bloomsbury Fashion Central. Accessed May 35, 2019. [http://dx.doi.org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.2752/BEWDF/EDch1072](http://dx.doi.org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.2752/BEWDF/EDch1072).

\(^{81}\) Wagner, “Rwanda and Burundi”.

\(^{82}\) Interview with Amandine, April 25, 2019.

\(^{83}\) Interview with Giselle, April 24, 2019.

\(^{84}\) Interview with Amandine, April 25, 2019.

\(^{85}\) Interview with Giselle, April 24, 2019.
beautiful. If kitenge indeed arrived from West-Africa, the wax print fabrics lost some of their speaking powers along the way. For Rwandans, kitenge was – and remains – a purely aesthetic product. Instead of choosing prints for their patterns or meanings, Amandine and Giselle said they would look primarily at colours when selecting their kitenge. This is one sense in which the Rwandan wearing of kitenge is essentially different from wearing pagne in various West-African countries such as Togo.

The Rwandan affinity with printed fabrics can be traced back through the twentieth century through several pictures taken in Rwanda during the colonial period. Images from the early twentieth century show Rwandan notables in striped, dotted or flowered cloth, worn across their shoulders, mushanana style. Particularly telling are images of Rwandan king Mutare III and his second wife, Rosalie Gicanda, dating from the 1950s. The royal couple’s tall, statuesque figures acquire extraordinary élan in the more elaborately printed fabrics that fall from their shoulders in large folds. On one particularly stunning picture, Mutare III wears a light-coloured cloth criss-crossed by small airplanes, bordered with a dark-coloured strip.

Figs. 7 + 8. King Mutara III Rudahigwa of Rwanda and his second wife, Rosalie Gicanda. Photographers and dates unknown (1950s). Images courtesy of Collection Michel Campion.

86 Interview with Amandine, April 25, 2019; Interview with Giselle, April 24, 2019.
87 Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation.
88 This analysis is far from representative, as kings always have a specific position in society so their manner of dressing is not the same as it is elsewhere in society. However, this instance is still noteworthy.
89 Mutare was became king of the Rwandan monarchy after his father had been dethroned by Belgian colonial authorities. Mutare III was also the first catholic king of Rwanda.
with contrasting flowers and a letter ‘R’ [fig. 7]. This is a kanga, a type of rectangle cotton cloth, mostly worn in Tanzania.\textsuperscript{90} Mutare wears it draped over a white collared shirt. In another portrait, his wife Rosalie also wears a kanga; hers is larger and wrapped more horizontally, covering both her arms to display more of the fabric surface. In the centre, there is an eye-like shape; below it, a text in Swahili. The border of this kanga is lined with what looks like a paisley motif [fig. 8].\textsuperscript{91}

These images tell us that the appeal of printed cloth lured not only from West-Africa, but also from the east. Renu Modi, in her documentary \textit{Common Threads} (2018), has embedded kanga and kitenge in a web of Pacific trade relations. She points out that printed textiles reached East-Africa also via another route: the extensive trade network between India and Zanzibar. This route is hardly ever illuminated, but it is important to understand the popularity of printed cloth aesthetics in East-Africa. In fact, kitenge sold in East-African countries such as Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda is still to a large extent produced in India. Some kitenges on the markets in these countries show paisley motifs and influences that remind one of the pointy flowers and leaves seen on Indian chintz.

It seems that the trajectories of kitenge are even more complex than initially thought. Above story demonstrates that adequately accounting for and representing difference of people, objects and cultures involves moving beyond a historiographic Eurocentrism and the taking for granted of unidirectional movements. Hybridity, or Third Space, predicates a sense of negotiation or interaction that comes from multiple sides. Through locating an alternative origin of kitenge aesthetics in Pacific trade relations between East-Africa and India, the central role of Dutch and British traders begins to fade and a space for acknowledgement of south-south trade relations opens up.

\textbf{Kitenge as business}

During the last three decades, African print fabric has grown into a booming trade. In the second half of the twentieth century, an extensive trade in cheaper wax print fabrics had already come into existence in West-Africa. Several local manufacturers, in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo and Cote D'Ivoire, had begun to take advantage of the popularity of the prints by locally and mechanically producing cheaper versions. The 1990s, when West-African economies increasingly opened up to global textile trade, saw the arrival of Chinese-

\textsuperscript{90} Rose Marie Beck, “Text on textiles: proverbiality as characteristic of equivocal communication at the East African coast (Swahili)”, \textit{Journal of African Cultural Studies} 17, no. 2 (2005), 131-160.

\textsuperscript{91} The translation of the Swahili text is: “May the eye of the wicked be blind upon my child.” For a wider analysis on textuality in and on kanga cloth, see Rose Marie Beck, “Text on textiles”. 
manufactured wax prints; often of relatively good quality and low price, they soon flooded the fabric markets. Some were exact copies of popular Vlisco prints.\(^{92}\) While the hybrid character of wax print fabrics already complicates the question of origin, this additional instance of appropriation further muddles distinctions between authenticity and reproduction.\(^{93}\) Vlisco, in response, positioned itself at the high end of the market for wax print fabrics, and has since branded itself as ‘the true original’.\(^{94}\)

As a consequence, kitenge did become more widely available in many African countries. Giselle mentioned that she saw more and more people wearing kitenge in Rwanda towards the 1990s: “People would go to Congo to buy the fabrics to sell them in Rwanda. It became business.”\(^{95}\) At this point, Giselle’s story, and that of other informants, falters. In 1994, the Rwandan genocide swept over the country. In a period of a mere hundred days, one million Rwandans were killed in a cruel slaughter of the country’s Tutsi citizens by militant members of the Hutu majority. The genocide formally ended in early July as the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a rebel army led by Tutsi commander Paul Kagame, seized the country. However, the deep trauma and forced displacement that the genocide inflicted last until this day.

Kagame has been president of Rwanda since 2000.\(^{96}\) His policies have focused on stimulation of the Rwandan economy, and with success: economic growth has been over 7% of GDP per year since 2010. In that year, Kagame’s government instigated a ‘Made in Rwanda’ policy, which stimulates local production. Rwanda’s fashion and textile business have benefited from these policies. In 2016, Rwanda imposed higher import tariffs on second-hand clothing coming from the United States, which long constituted the primary source of clothing for Rwandans. With the prices of these clothes doubling or even tripling, the demand for tailored garments made of kitenge has increased.\(^{97}\) Rwandan newspaper *The

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\(^{92}\) A print which is sold by many on Kimironko market is a copy of 14/0663, a print from Vlisco’s ‘Classics’ collection. Called ‘Target’ or ‘Record’, among other nicknames, the print consists of large, concentric circles made up of small flecks, set against a web of tiny dots and lines. This print is extensively discussed by Nina Sylvanus in *Patterns in Circulation.* Other classic patterns of which copies can be found are ‘Speed Bird’, ‘Rolls Royce’, ‘Necklace’ and ‘The Happy Family’. For more about reproductions and counterfeiting of wax print textiles, see Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation.*

\(^{93}\) Sylvanus challenges Walter Benjamin’s argument that the ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ is necessarily diminished by its mechanical reproduction; the story of wax print “troubles the very idea of loss of authenticity and aura through replication, but also reveals that ‘origin’ is just as fabricated as the copy”. Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation*, 16.

\(^{94}\) Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation*; “The Production of African Wax Cloth”.

\(^{95}\) Interview with Giselle, April 24, 2019.

\(^{96}\) Kagame successed Pasteur Bizimungu, to whom he was vice-president between 1994 and 2000.

\(^{97}\) Rwanda also imports mass-produced clothes from Dubai and China, and ‘Made in Rwanda’ also involves the instalment of (often Chinese-led) factories mass-producing clothes. However, these clothes are not as desirable to Rwandans as imports from Europe and the US, as the quality of the fabrics is regarded to be bad and many
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*New Times* has repeatedly devoted articles to the wearing of ‘local’ kitenge and mushanana fashions. Tailors now line the streets of Kigali and convene in strategic places, such as Kimironko market, where fabrics are sold.

Entering Kimironko Market, on the east side of Kigali, is like entering a maze. The large hall is split up into dozens of tiny stalls, some as small as a single square meter. The stalls are divided by thin wooden constructions upholstered with whatever the owner sells, from cleaning tools to kitchenware, souvenirs to shoes and second-hand clothing. By far the most disorienting section of the market is the kitenge corner, where countless rows of fabric reach from floor to ceiling, forming impenetrable walls of colour. The sheer mass of colours and motifs is overwhelming. Through narrow pathways, mostly female vendors guide potential customers from stall to stall.

These vendors buy their stock on the other side of Kigali. Behind an entirely inconspicuous facade in the bustling streets of the Kiyovu neighbourhood hides a second fabric walhalla, where stacks of kitenge arrive from abroad. Most kitenge still comes from Congo; nowadays, this is where Chinese-led warehouses are located, from which wax copies are distributed to various African countries. Chinese manufacturers, sometimes in collaboration with ‘Nanettes’ – a younger generation of Nana Benz – have won over the African market for pagne. The fabric’s white selvages, once a point of reference for quality and origin, now contain cryptic lines such as “wax made as Nigeria” or “wax Holladeis”, while the large, shiny stickers, one on every six-yard piece of newly-bought cloth, bear the names of companies registered in China. The quality of cottons has differentiated and polyester prints have appeared. It has become more difficult to distinguish a good from a bad kitenge.

Slowly, an aesthetic turn also becomes visible. Contemporary kitenge patterns, manufactured in China, lack the “aesthetics of imperfection” that made initial wax print fabrics so appealing. Their crackles, if they have any, look more static; their colours are more neatly aligned. But while the cloth has lost some of its visual vibrancy, it remains vibrant matter: kitenge still enchants, both in Africa and beyond. Since the 1990s, African print respondents said the clothes looked too much like uniforms. Uniqueness is an important fashion value among Rwandan consumers.

98 Headlines read “Shine in different styles with kitenge fabrics” (August 11, 2012); “The trendy kitenge” (June 5, 2014) and “Looking stylish in a mushanana” (November 6, 2013). As reporter Rachel Breaux wrote, “one of the greatest perks about African fashion is the ability to design and create your own pieces. The Rwandan market stalls are lined with brightly coloured fabrics and rows of seamstresses creating beautiful localized designs.” Rachel Breaux, “The trendy kitenge”, *The New Times*, June 5, 2014. It must be taken into account that some authors and readers of The New Times are expats, as is Breaux; yet, the majority is Rwandan.
fabrics have repeatedly occurred on the catwalks of European fashion brands. In 2007, Nina Sylvanus noted that African-style objects had become a veritable lifestyle trend, not only among members of the African diaspora, but also among a group of European cosmopolitan consumers, to whom it supposedly represents an exotic sense of Africanity.

This comes across as paradoxical at the end of this chapter, which has demonstrated that kitenge is a result of multiple transformations, interpretations, appropriations and re-appropriations. Kitenge, wax cloth, and batik before it, have always participated in transnational trade networks. Imperialism and global capitalism, articulated in the global south as well as in the north, accelerated the rhythm and scope of its exchange. Widely desired for aesthetic and economic reasons, kitenge now criss-crosses the globe at high speed. As we speak, kitenge continues to transform. The following chapter analyses Afriek as a locus of another such transformation. While kitenge becomes appropriated for Afriek’s cross-cultural project, the cloth itself, through its materiality and its complex, singular genealogy, may again thwart the control of human minds and human hands.

Chapter 2 | Being on the border: company practices

Introduction
In this chapter, I follow kitenge from the market onto the wide, wooden tables of Afriek’s atelier in Kigali [fig. 9]. Until the winter of 2019, it was around these tables that tailors, designers, managers and owners would gather to discuss the designs and the details of the collection to come. Many cross-cultural encounters happened under the literal and figurative roof of Afriek. What shape did these encounters take? Did they aggravate cultural differences among the team, or displace expectations and oppositions? Bhabha’s concepts of Third Space and cultural hybridity will be of guidance in grasping the tensions and interventions that occurred in different facets of the company’s practice.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, I shortly introduce the company’s different actors. The second section of this chapter contains a brief outline of the history of Afriek, its aims, and its means. In the third section, I describe the selection process of kitenges used for Afriek and question what kind of cultural enunciation is produced through this process. In the fourth section, I ask the same questions in relation to the production of Afriek’s garments. The last section is devoted to the company’s ethics. In each of these sections, I seek to locate two types of tensions: tensions that arise in cross-cultural encounters, and tensions between Afriek’s praxis and representations of it in the company’s online discourse.

Multiple Africanities, multiple westernities
In this chapter, I approach the company both as a ‘commercial business’ and in the sense of ‘a group of people’. Besides people, I recognise another actor: kitenge itself, which interacts with the human beings involved with Afriek as it transforms and is transformed into garments. As I have already introduced kitenge in the first chapter, it seems no less than fitting to introduce the members of the Afriek team here. Unfortunately, because of the short time span of this research project and the downscaling of the Afriek atelier just prior to my visit to Kigali, I was able to interview only three out of the fifteen to twenty tailors that used to occupy the Afriek atelier on a daily basis.

The segment of the team travelling to Rwanda from the Netherlands is by no means a homogenously Dutch or European group. Co-founders Sivan and Kars were born in the
Netherlands; Kars to Dutch parents, Sivan to a Dutch father and Israeli mother. The company’s designers are Jolanda, Stéphane and Lisa. Jolanda is Dutch but was schooled in high fashion in the French capital. Stéphane, inversely, is French, but moved to the Netherlands more than a decade ago to pursue his career in fashion. Lisa has a Dutch mother and a Japanese father, and graduated several years ago from the ArtEZ fashion academy in Arnhem, The Netherlands.

Of the team members living in Rwanda, few have spent their whole lives in the country. Production manager Joseph is Rwandan, as are tailors Christian and Diane, but tailor Jean Bosco is Burundian, and the three shared Afriek’s sewing machines with an amalgam of other African nationalities: Burkina Faso, Guinee, Congolese... In short, while Afriek may seem composed of two separate worlds – Africa and the west, meeting in the middle – these worlds are in fact made up of multiple Africanities and multiple westernities, combined, shifting, hybrid.

**Company history: challenging stereotypes**

We started Afriek because we believe that ideas about Africa have been biased for too long. It is our mission to change those prevailing perspectives through equal collaboration with all our partners, creating colorful, high-end fashion. […] We hope to challenge the one-sided Western image of Africa, as we connect bright individuals across the globe.

- Afriek.com

In 2012, Kars and Sivan met in Kigali. Kars, who studied International Relations at the time, was doing an internship at the Dutch Embassy, while Sivan was conducting research for her master’s thesis in Conflict Studies. The two met at the hostel where they were staying. During an interview in his current hometown, Amsterdam, Kars narrated how they:

> talked a lot about Rwanda, and how Africa is looked at, and how this does not do justice to reality. […] When I went to Rwanda, people said, ‘watch out, it’s dangerous business’. And then I arrived, and Kigali looked like a Southern-European capital. It’s such a contrast with the signals you get here [in the Netherlands] when you say you are going to Rwanda. We wanted to minimise the contrast.¹⁰¹

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¹⁰¹ Interview with Kars, April 15, 2019. In his novel *A Passage to India*, E. M. Forster already noted that “the Mediterranean is the human norm” (270).
Sivan added: “The west has been looking at Africa in the same, negative way for centuries, whether it’s colonialism or development aid, it’s all the same thing. […] We did not want to change anything or help in Africa, we wanted to change something in the Netherlands”.102

Afriek as a company emerged from a critical stance towards, as the website reads, a “one-sided Western image of Africa”. According to Sivan and Kars, this image projects the continent as “dangerous” and in need of “change” or “help”. What was at stake for them was a change of representation, an attempt to supplant a stereotypical view of Africa and Africans that circulates in western media. In The Location of Culture, Bhabha defines and problematizes the stereotype as follows:

The stereotype […] is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, denying the play of difference […], constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.103

The fixation of this representation is articulated in a constant urge to repeat a generally assumed knowledge of an other. Bhabha: “the stereotype […] vacillates between what is already ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated”.104

What might undoing a stereotype entail? Kars and Sivan chose fashion as their vehicle. Kars remembers how during his time in Rwanda, he “saw all these beautiful fabrics pass by…” and decided to have one of his blazers copied in kitenge fabrics by a Rwandan tailor. He selected two patterns from the market: geometric and symmetrical, they were, in Kars’ own words, “not too crazy”. Back in the Netherlands, Kars wore the blazers repeatedly to parties and festivals. In the Netherlands, too, kitenge charmed and captivated the human eye: “[The reactions] were all very positive, from ‘what a cool blazer’ to ‘where did you get that blazer, can you get me one too?’”105

Sivan, meanwhile, had been experimenting with a cross-cultural business concept, selling Rwanda-made leather sandals to friends in the Netherlands. Sivan told Kars about the concept, who suggested to Sivan that they start a company producing kitenge blazers instead. By the end of April 2013, the company was registered at the Dutch Chamber of Commerce.

102 Interview with Sivan, January 26, 2019.
103 Bhabha, Location of Culture, 107.
104 Bhabha, Location of Culture, 94-95.
105 Interview with Kars, April 15, 2019.
Kars departed to Rwanda the following day in search of textiles and a team of tailors, to begin the development the first of five collections. “Colourful” and “high-end”, Afriek’s kitenge blazers would “positively influence the image of Africa back home”.

However, bright colours cannot do the trick. Bhabha has argued that undoing a stereotype requires moving beyond the replacement of negative images with positive images, as the recognition of some images as negative and others as positive equals a judgement that is rooted in a prior – in this case western – normativity. Such a judgement only dismisses the stereotype and does not subvert it. Instead, according to Bhabha, it is necessary to actively engage with the processes in which the identities of others are constructed. This unmasks the stereotype as a process of production and repetition and demonstrates that cultural identities and signifiers in fact are not locked into place.

For Kars and Sivan, fashion would become more than a positive image. Apart from producing an aesthetically appealing product, fashion offered them a possibility to experiment with cross-cultural collaboration. In the following sections, different facets of this cross-cultural project as it was acted out in reality will be illuminated. Over the course of five years, Sivan and Kars each repeatedly visited Kigali to coordinate the development and production of their collections. Afriek produced three menswear and two womenswear collections, at irregular intervals: neither Sivan nor Kars had experience in fashion and maintaining a stable turnover proved to be a challenge.

107 Bhabha, Location of Culture, 95.
Choosing kitenge and the making of Africanity

Kitenge is an East African, West African and Central African fabric, often worn by women and wrapped around the chest or waist, over the head as a headscarf, or as a baby sling. We work with African print because it directly shows you the origin of the product. The recognizability of the fabric instantly provokes conversation. And, obviously, it is beautiful in its depth and richness of the design.

-Afriek.com

This statement on the website of Afriek implicates two things. Firstly, it suggests that kitenge is obviously and originally African. As I concluded in the previous chapter, the link between kitenge and a sense of ‘Africanity’ nowadays seems a given; yet, while kitenge is certainly not ‘un-African’, it is also not African by origin. Rather, its Africanity is the result of processes of exchange and authentication. Secondly, above statement insinuates that the recognisable ‘Africanity’ of kitenge is exactly the reason that Afriek chose to work with it. At Afriek, kitenge functions as a reference to Africa.

Nina Sylvanus has argued in “The Fabric of Africanity” that the use of kitenge as a signifier of Africanity by western actors has an effect both on kitenge and on the western view of African identity. According to Sylvanus, “by allotting an ‘African’ stamp to [kitenge], western actors may produce an ‘Africanity’ that responds above all by ‘fixing’ an identity and thus an expectation”.108 Thus, by assigning African origins to kitenge, Afriek posits kitenge as purely African and thereby cushions kitenge’s internal play of differences as portrayed in chapter one. At the same time, the idea that Afriek ‘produces’ Africanity by selecting its signifier suggests that Afriek’s selection of kitenge impacts the aesthetic notion of an ‘African’ look.

What characterised this selection process? During the first two years, Kars and Sivan bought kitenge on the market in Kigali with the help of designer Jolanda, who had been appointed to collaborate with Sivan and Kars on the development of their first collections [fig 10]. During our first interview, Sivan sighed that it was no easy task to find the right kitenges: there were many qualities of kitenge to choose from, and it was sometimes difficult to find large amounts of the same fabric. Besides, the prints needed to appeal to a Dutch

108 Sylvanus, “The Fabric of Africanity”, 212. Sylvanus does in fact not refer to kitenge specifically, but to imitation wax print fabrics – which Afriek’s kitenges also are.
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market. Sivan: “We had a Dutch market in mind. We always said that we did not want to change anything or help in Africa, we wanted to change something in the Netherlands.”

Their knowledge of the Dutch fashion market affected their choice of fabrics. Jolanda remembered: “We made a choice based on colour combinations. […] In Africa, people go for flashy colours, like bright green or purple. In the Netherlands, people prefer more earthy tones. It was remarkable that Kars and I usually did not buy the fabrics that the Africans liked a lot”. Colour combinations were not the only selection criteria: another was the pattern. Sivan: “They were always abstract, we did not choose figurative prints. It would look quite daring, anyways.” This comment suggests that figurative prints would be considered too bold for a Dutch market.

![Image](https://example.com/image1)

**Fig. 11.** The kitenges used for Afriek’s launch collection in 2013 and their respective names. Image courtesy of Afriek.

For Afriek’s first collection, Kars, Sivan and Jolanda selected eight different prints, all of them abstract. There were four larger and four smaller patterns for customers to choose from. Several were brightly coloured, in red, orange, bright green and blue; others were more toned-down, in warm yellow, dark blue, olive green and white [fig. 11]. Similar to the West-African Nana Benz, Kars and Sivan gave the fabrics names: Dandy, Delfts, Bar, Denim, Ruby, Headset, Eye, and Trigon. Sivan and Kars invented the names, which corresponded to their interpretation of the prints. the Eye print featured eye-like shapes; the Denim print was

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109 Interview with Sivan, January 26, 2019.
webbed with denim blue circles and stripes; the Delfts print, according to Sivan, was a motif reminiscent of Delft blue, the characteristic blue-and-white chinaware popular in the Dutch Golden Age. Sivan asserted that this naming was merely functional, as it simplified communication about the patterns. Yet, it could simultaneously be read as a Dutch-inspired renewal of the ‘naming’ of wax prints by the Nana Benz.

Both in choosing kitenge as material and in subsequently making a selection that would fit a Dutch market, Sivan and Kars assumed a central role in moulding the idea of Africanity that would be transported to the Netherlands. Sivan and Kars could be considered what Sylvanus has called ‘cultural experts’, who define specific objects as cultural signifiers, and subsequently adjust them to a western market. Similarly, Jackson and Dwyer have argued that companies in this way produce rather than simply communicate an idea of cultural difference. It could be said that Afriek commodifies a partly self-produced idea of Africanness, of which kitenge is the primary signifier. With Afriek’s selection of abstract and toned-down kitenge, these characteristics also came to represent Africa to the Netherlands.

After nearly two years, a shift occurred on the Kigali fabric market which prompted Sivan and Kars to start buying fabrics in Kampala, Uganda. Kars described this shift:

> There was a shift in Kigali, in the type of fabrics they sold. [...] It was more of that… harsh, bright printed fabric [...] before that, they had more of the colours that we used to have, we rarely used those harsh, sharp colours; rather the earthy, more quiet ones. So we went to Kampala to look for them, and we found that there was much more fabric in Kampala in the first place.

Despite the fact that these “harsh, bright” fabrics were sold in Rwanda, Sivan and Kars instead went lengths to find the quality and tone that fit their audience; something between an idea of Africanity and wearability for Dutch customers. This underlines the extent to which their idea of Africa needed to fit a specific picture and did not adapt to the dynamic reality of the Rwandan market.

In Afriek’s representations of kitenge, the hybridity of kitenge was not exacerbated, but downplayed in order to represent an ‘original’ sense of Africanity instead. Such a mode of representation does not “den[y] the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture”, which Bhabha suggests is a condition both for the displacement of the stereotype

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111 Interview with Sivan, January 26, 2019.
112 Sylvanus, “The Fabric of Africanity”.
113 Jackson and Dwyer, “Commodifying difference”.
114 Interview with Kars, April 15, 2019.
and of the development of a Third Space. On the contrary, a signifier of Africanity that is “already ‘in-place’” becomes re-fixed and thus reinforces stereotypical thinking and the binary opposition between Africa and the west. While the idea of Africa that Afriek presents could be assessed as positive within a western context, as an idea it remains stable and thus does not intervene with that which is already known.

At the same time, in practice, Afriek actively transforms the idea of kitenge aesthetics. The selection of kitenge that Sivan, Kars and Jolanda made was based on their aim to appeal to a Dutch market and not inasmuch on the wish to bring forward an accurate representation of the aesthetics of kitenge as they are appreciated in Rwanda. While this does produce African difference to a western audience, it simultaneously shows that difference is produced in the first place. Engaging with these processes and bringing them into representation, rather than authenticating the result of the process, would in fact demonstrate that “the original […] can be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum and so on: the ‘original’ is never finished or complete in itself”.

Before moving on, let us shortly return to the ‘Kampala shift’. It is particularly noteworthy because it is known that the Kampala markets sell Indian-produced kitenges. It is possible that Afriek selected several of these for their collections. One of Afriek’s consumers, whom I interviewed in the winter of 2019, owned a bomber jacket with a graphic paisley motif from Afriek’s 2016 collection. The selvedges of the cloth have been destroyed, so it is now impossible to trace the location of its design and manufacture. Nevertheless, the appearance of paisley motifs is quite typical for the contemporary kitenge trade between East-Africa and India. Such articulated visual signs of hybridity in the cloth itself could potentially negate kitenge’s ‘African’ fixity in the public sphere. I will return to this in chapter three.

Fashioning hybridity

With our garments we create a dialogue between different cultures. For each new collection that we create, we bring one of our designers to Rwanda to collaborate with our local team of tailors. Together they finalize the designs into samples, closely collaborating to get the ideal

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117 Personal correspondence with Renu Modi.
118 Renu Modi comments on this in Modi, Common Threads.
fit and design. In this way we bring together the expertise and workmanship of the tailors with the vision of the designer.
-Afriek.com

Designing hybridity
Afriek’s garments are not just fabric, they are also cut. How did Afriek’s designers give shape to a product meant to cross borders? Afriek began as a collection of only blazers of the type that Kars commissioned during his very first visit to Rwanda. Because he received so many compliments about his blazers in the Netherlands, continuing with blazers was a logical move. Blazers hold a broad appeal: the blazer is a staple item in the wardrobe of many men across the globe, particularly in Europe and the United States. Rooted in the history of the British navy and popularised as sportswear at rowing clubs, the blazer gained terrain in Europe and the United States as leisure- and formal wear in the second half of the twentieth century. Of the three-piece suit, the centre of the male wardrobe, the blazer is by far the most complicated to construct and is therefore considered the epitome of western luxury bespoke tailoring.

The choice of Sivan and Kars to develop a collection of blazers was not only motivated by the general appeal of Kars’ blazers among a western audience. It was also a strategic choice for setting up their company. Because blazers are notoriously difficult to make, they were the ultimate competency test for the Rwandan tailors that Kars set out to hire during his first months in Rwanda. Rwandan tailors usually have limited experience at making blazers. They are worn in Rwanda, although strictly for business occasions; usually, they are considered to be too warm for casual wear. Making a blazer as a Rwandan tailor required a relatively elaborate technical skillset. As Kars affirmed: “If you can make a good blazer, you can make anything else.”

Sivan and Kars engaged Jolanda, to develop the blazer pattern. Jolanda was well-trained in tailoring, but found that classic blazer tailoring was not quite compatible with kitenge cottons:

Normally when you make a men’s blazer, you see that in London, too, they stiffen the front panels with horse hair and then press them, but that’s

120 Anne Hollander, Sex and Suits (New York: Knopf, 1994).
121 Interview with Kars, April 15, 2019.
impossible with cotton. I thought, how do I get the tailoring into that? So I took the details: the hand-stitched lining, the perfectly made welt pockets.122

In this reasoning, Jolanda refers to London’s Savile Row, Europe’s temple of male tailoring. Instead of transposing the Savile Row standard, usually applied to wool, onto kitenge cottons, Jolanda decided to design an allusion to Savile Row instead, marked by meticulous detailing. The collection of blazers was launched in the late fall of 2013.

Jolanda also designed Afriek’s second men’s collection, which appeared in spring 2015. Besides blazers, this collection included shirts, shorts, pants and bomber jackets. Jolanda: “I approached that collection differently, more from the question of what would sell.”123 The collection did indeed sell in the Netherlands. By popular demand, the collection was followed that same year by a women’s collection, designed by Lisa. Lisa’s design approach was based on a combination of “a sense of fashion that appealed to me, the look of the prints [...] what seemed fitting to Afriek [...] and what consumer demand there is in terms garment types”.124 The collection consisted of a sleeveless turtleneck top, pleated skirt, shorts, a sleeved top, tunic, long coat, bra, long wide pants, and tote bag. All items were available in multiple prints. The collection was described as a combination of “colourful African fabrics with the strict lines of western womenswear”.125

However, kitenge did not always allow its capturing within these strict lines. Regarding working with kitenge, Jolanda said: “The cloth is stiff and hard […] so that was sometimes difficult when it came to putting in a sleeve and freedom of movement and such”.126 Lisa narrated that:

the fabric did not really yield… and in [my] first collection, it’s all quite tight around the body […] that’s not really comfortable. And the surfaces are smaller. While, in that fabric […] it apparently works better to keep the pieces and surfaces large. You see that a lot [in Rwanda], where garments have puff sleeves or ruffles.127

122 Interview with Jolanda, May 9, 2019.
123 Interview with Jolanda, May 9, 2019.
124 Interview with Lisa, March 25, 2019.
125 This description can be read on Lisa’s website and was part of the description of the crowdfunding project for the collection. “Home”, Lisa Konno, accessed May 28, 2019, http://www.lisaLisa.com/home/; “Afriek Womenswear Collection”, oneplanetcrowd.
126 Interview with Jolanda, May 9, 2019.
127 Interview with Lisa, March 25, 2019.
Lisa recognised the need to adapt to the visual and tactile materiality of kitenge cloth. This is an example of the way in which kitenge gave a different direction to Afriek’s project, appearing as a material actor.

In the late autumn of 2016, Stéphane came to replace Jolanda as the designer of Afriek’s menswear. From that moment onward, Stéphane and Lisa worked together in developing their respective men’s and women’s collections, which were to appear in the spring of 2018. Stéphane:

We did a lot of research on African clothing […] we had this idea of creating a dialogue between Rwandan culture and Dutch culture. My approach was really utilitarian, but Lisa’s approach for women was more about certain volumes that are considered really African… like ruffles and gathering, so everything that creates volume.128

Lisa’s designs for her second women’s collection were indeed more voluminous. Overall, the fabric planes were larger and allowed more movement. Rows of ruffles on a sleeved top and the heavy folds of an oversized wraparound trench coat played with the stiff weave and lively print of the kitenge cloth [fig. 12]. About his own collection, Stéphane said: “At least for

Fig. 12. A trench coat, shirt and shorts figurating in a lookbook image of Afriek’s Spring 2018 collection. Photo by Dadi Kouame, image courtesy of Afriek.

128 Interview with Stéphane, March 23, 2019.
menswear I wanted it to be super contemporary […] super wearable, also a bit utilitarian. So really functional and really wearable, really desirable for a lot of people. For a lot of different people. In Africa, or in Europe”. Stéphane kept existing designs, such as the bomber jacket and the blazer, and added several items, such as a jumpsuit, car coat and a parka.

In recent years, utilitarianism has been a recurring trend in global fashion, one that befits today’s active lifestyles. However, the blazer, bomber jacket, trench coat and parka have a striking element in common: all four garment types were, at different moments in history, central elements of European military uniforms before making their way into leisure clothing. Before the age of global fashion media, these styles were widely disseminated through military and colonial missions. The utilitarianism of uniforms became popular in Africa as a form of colonial mimicry. Notably, Bhabha has argued that mimicry reveals internal difference on the side of the imitator and the imitated: “mimicry […] disclos[es] the ambivalence of colonial discourse and also disrupts its authority”.

How do the designs of Jolanda, Lisa and Stéphane relate to the concept of Third Space? Jolanda’s collections and Lisa’s first collection were designed with a western market in mind, as Afriek did not open up to the Rwandan market until 2017. However, the compromise their “strict lines” to the materiality of kitenge initiated a play between strictness, ornament, line, fold… In a way, kitenge – itself a politically objective actor – directed their designs. What remained of a ‘western’ style became increasingly difficult to discern. Stéphane’s utilitarian garments, too, are marked by inner cultural tensions.

Moreover, Afriek’s communication about the spring 2018 collection does not contain the designs in cultural terms, leaving them open to interpretation. The description of the collection on the Afriek website focuses only on the collaborative aspect of the collection.

129 Interview with Stéphane, March 23, 2019.
131 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 122. Besides, these garments speak of other conflicts: while they may represent a mutually respectful dialogue between cultures, they also still speak of violence and the history that shaped the binary relation between Africa and the west. At the same time, the blazer, bomber jacket, trench coat and parka nowadays also frequently occur in women’s wardrobes. The cultural dialogue implicated in these garments intersects with a dialogue between masculine and feminine, and points at the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and other aspects of identity.
132 “Our Spring Summer ’18 collection is created through bringing together ideas and talents of people from different cities and backgrounds. We looked at the interaction that fashion always makes between people from different places, designing for our African and European customers. Barriers such as distance, language or preconceptions often hold us back, but we use them to inspire us. From Kigali to Amsterdam to Accra and beyond, we thank our community for collaborating on this collection: joining us in exchanging inspiration, talents, perspectives and ideas. Afriek is an ever evolving brand searching for equality – that’s why it’s important to keep exchanging.” “Campaign story”, Afriek, accessed May 27, 2019, https://afriek.com/pages/ss18-collection-story.
However, what keeps the question of two opposed cultures on the table is Afriek’s characterisation of the human minds participating in their production: the contrasting of the “vision of the designer”, brought to Rwanda from the west to collaborate with the “expertise and workmanship of the tailors”.

*Garment construction: a tale of tailors*

How was the material production of garments organised, and what form did this dialogue take? Afriek suggests that this process took the shape of a collaboration between the “expertise and workmanship” of the Rwandan tailors and the “vision” of the – in this case western – designer. The coupling of ‘design’ with ‘vision’ is characteristic of the way in which design is usually framed in the west, as a process of creating a concept, a representation, in other words, a *vision*. In such a frame, Rwandan tailors would not be considered designers. In Rwanda, customers visit their tailor of choice with images of the desired styles, found and organised on Pinterest. Some tailors own albums or posters displaying an array of local styles for customers to choose from. Design in the sense of creating a novel concept seems not to be a priority here.

During his first months in Rwanda, Kars assembled a team of tailors. He brought several images of blazers from the Netherlands and asked multiple tailors to make a test blazer, which he judged based on the tailoring of their sleeves, back split, lining and detailing. After one month and twelve blazers, Kars reached a working agreement with three tailors who, apart from producing satisfactory work, agreed to work with a patterning system. In Rwanda, tailors usually do not work with a patterning system but instead measure and cut their garments according to each customer’s individual wishes and bodies. During the process of construction, customers will return to their tailor multiple times for fittings and, if necessary, impromptu adjustments.

However, for Afriek’s production, standardization was required. Standardization is a main characteristic of western fashion: in a fashion system driven by speed and offshore production, standardization allows faster production in larger quantities with less need for communication, as well as easier regulation and control of output. For Afriek, however, it was to a lesser extent the speed of production that counted, as its production quantities remained relatively low and Afriek did not produce collections seasonally. What was at stake for Afriek was meeting the expectations of the Dutch market. As Sivan said: “We were going

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133 Kars and Sivan did consider hiring a Rwandan menswear designer after Jolanda left the company in 2016, but this was not realised.
to produce for a Dutch market, which is used to every product looking the same and having standard sizes, so it needed to be a good, standard blazer.”

For Afriek, standardization was primarily a way of bridging knowledge across two continents. How was this ‘bridging’ enacted?

As the tailors were not familiar with a patterning system, Kars and Jolanda organised workshop for the tailors to learn more about it. Jolanda:

I explained about the patterns and about what it all meant, but I let [the tailors] go their way […] I discovered they are good at solving problems. Sometimes they would just change something sketching, by hand […] they would not draw the pattern all over again but would just cut off a piece. […] But the clothes that came back, were good.

This short statement from Jolanda is quite meaningful, as it indicates that the distinction between the designer as ‘visionary’ and the tailor as ‘craftsman’ was not exactly clear-cut in practice. In fact, while Jolanda worked very technically, adhering to patterns, the tailors demonstrated a more creative approach based on their own vision.

When asked about their experiences with the patterning system, Afriek’s tailors mentioned primarily that they had appreciated learning about it. Jean Bosco, one the Afriek’s tailors, commented: “Here [in Rwanda], if you want to make this shirt, because someone likes it and wants you to make it for them too, it does not work because there are no patterns, no measurements, no precision, so we use our brains a lot. And that is difficult”.

While Bosco intended to express that making the same piece without a pattern was difficult, in another reading, this comment also underlines that tailoring in Rwanda is not only ‘workmanship’, but also involves a good amount of brain cracking to make sure a customer gets the perfect fit.

Stéphane attested: “They work from pictures, the tailors there, they are super visual […] And they can find solutions. They are the masters of problem-solving. […] they find

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134 Interview with Sivan, January 26, 2019.
135 Appadurai has argued that “commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge. […] such knowledge can be of two sorts: the knowledge […] that goes into the production of the commodity; and the knowledge that goes into appropriately consuming the commodity”. Over longer distances and across cultures, Appadurai argues, the distribution of such knowledge can be difficult and complex; in that case, it is up to the merchant to “bridg[e] across large gaps in knowledge between producer and consumer”. Appadurai has argued that “such bridges persist because of unclosable cultural gaps”. Whether such gaps are unclosable remains to be seen – but it is certainly true that cultural differences come with differences in knowledge. The question is how such ‘bridging’ is enacted. Appadurai, The Social Life of Things, 41, 42, 43.
136 Interview with Jolanda, May 9, 2019.
137 Interview with Jean Bosco, February 27, 2019.
solutions with like, two pieces of string and one match”.\textsuperscript{138} The tailors demonstrated creativity and ‘out of the box’-thinking. Both Lisa and Stéphane argued that especially at the level of detailing and the placing of the fabric, the tailors were very specialised. They knew how to work with the character of kitenge, could interact with it more smoothly. In short, the tailors were in fact already visionaries.

As it turns out, it is not always exactly clear where design ends and tailoring begins. All ‘designers’ and ‘tailors’ were each to some extent both craftsman and visionary. In that sense, the creation of garments at Afriek could be regarded not only a dialogue or an exchange of knowledge between two poles, but also as the recognition of the presence of the other’s knowledge within the self, or one’s own knowledge in the other. This rhymes with what Bhabha has said of hybridity: “Hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity […] is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge”. In this case, that position could be summarised as that of the tailoring visionary, or the visionary tailor.\textsuperscript{139} Such a position does not imply a relativism of individual skills but rather underlines the difficulty to divide these skills into two oppositional categories.

**Ethics: equality, equivalence**

We believe in equality in everything we do. We promote this because we know it is not the reality in our world. Underlying big problems, such as cultural appropriation and unfair trade, is the notion that we are often unwilling to see the other as our equal, as people who have the same rights as us. […] We aim to create a more equal world through exchanging.

- Afriek.com

In this final section, I will discuss Afriek’s ethics, the principles of human conduct that guide the “distribution of political agency, the management of power relations, and issues of responsibility” between the different actors within the company.\textsuperscript{140} On the Afriek website, the term ‘equality’ is noted as the guiding principle for the company’s actions. According to Afriek, equality can be effectuated through exchange, communication and dialogue, terms that occur repeatedly throughout Afriek’s web discourse. As is explained on the website: “Through exchanging thoughts we can grow our understanding of each other and begin to

\textsuperscript{138} Interview with Stéphane, March 23, 2019.
\textsuperscript{139} Bhabha in Rutherford, “The Third Space”, 211.
\textsuperscript{140} Braidotti Transpositions, 12.
learn, changing the persisting status quo. In this way we aim to create a colorful and equal world.”  

Equality, however, is a contested term. In *Transpositions*, Braidotti advances a critique of egalitarianism in politics and ethics. It is necessary, she states, to “[question] the desirability of that very norm which is being pursued in the logic of rights and the pursuit of equality.” 142 What norm is implied in Afriek’s quest for global equality? On Afriek’s website, the word ‘equal’ is defined as “hav[ing] the same rights as us”. From the context of this utterance, it can be deducted that ‘us’, must be Kars and Sivan, who consequently come to represent the norm which the other parties are supposed to ‘equal’. 143

However, while on the website, the word ‘equal’ is used consistently, in interviews, Sivan instead used the Dutch word ‘gelijkwaardig’, which translates to English as ‘equivalent’ or ‘of the same value’. There is a difference in meaning. Equivalence connotes the existence of differences at equal value. The following quote by Sivan illustrates this:

[W]e make the biggest possible effort to see each other as equivalent. So we don’t say, we are helping people. We don’t say, we are teaching them how to do it. It was essential that it had to be equivalent. [...] [The tailors] have other priorities, a different logic. Which is not inferior, but we tend to think that it is. And we need to be very conscious of that. 144

This quote suggests that there is some kind of internal conflict between equality and equivalence.

How were political agency, power relations, and responsibilities distributed in practice? Several elements of Afriek’s working modes illustrate how Afriek gave shape to the ethical part of its cross-cultural project. First of all, communication within Afriek was non-hierarchic. About the communication with Sivan and Kars, Afriek’s Rwandan production manager, Joseph, said: “When Sivan is here, or Kars, they are not the boss. They are like the tailors, they are like me, they don’t want to show us that they are the boss.” 145 Christian agreed: “Working with Afriek has been like working in a little family. Kars and Sivan would come here, in Kigali, and they would have meetings with us, and they would always say that

141 Afriek, “About”.
142 Braidotti refers to Luce Irigaray’s article “Equal to Whom?” of which the title already contains an implicit critique of egalitarian politics.
143 Another sentence on the page reads: “We started Afriek because…”
144 Interview with Sivan, January 26, 2019.
145 Interview with Joseph, February 8, 2019.
we should live like a family, in good harmony. As a team, we worked in harmony.”

Moreover, most team members expressed that they could speak openly to each other about issues or questions that bothered them.

For all the different cultures and languages present in the atelier, this was not always easy. Joseph has occupied a key mediating position within Afriek. He arrived at Afriek in 2015 and has worked there permanently since, coordinating and overseeing the production. He played a central role between Kars and Sivan, the designers and the tailors, often literally translating questions and answers which bounced back and forth through the Afriek workshop in English, French and Kinyarwanda. This multilingual communication emphasised how ‘multiple’ the Afriek team really was.

There were clear differences among the team members, both in terms of culture and of their individual roles within the company, as this chapter has shown. At the same time, their manner of collaborating was on the basis of equivalence. The true value of such an ethics was perhaps not only the desirability of non-discriminatory collaboration in itself, but the fact that through such an ethics, encounters between different ideas, knowledges, approaches and opinions were enabled and even encouraged. In those moments of encounter, it became clear that these differences were not easily divided into binary categories. Third Space.

Interestingly, these categories returned in Afriek’s web discourse, where vision contrasted with workmanship, the western-ness of silhouette with the Africanity of cloth. For Bhabha, this is a central problem with contemporary celebrations of cultural diversity: “Although there is always an entertainment and encouragement of cultural diversity, there is always also a corresponding containment of it.” Yet, Afriek continues after the end of the production line. In the third section of this chapter, I have considered Afriek’s garments as hybrid objects. In the third chapter, I take representations of Afriek’s garments as well as the garments themselves and analyse them from a consumer perspective.

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146 Interview with Christian, February 27, 2019.
147 Bhabha in Rutherford, “The Third Space”, 208.
Chapter 3 | Cultural crossings: consuming Afriek

Afriek’s project does not stop at a finished product. On the contrary: the consumers that buy and wear Afriek garments are a vital extension of it. The consumption of an Afriek garment establishes an interaction between company and consumer. While part of this interaction is a purely economical transaction, this interaction equally involves an exchange of meaning between two independent actors, each acting out of their individual interest. What is at stake for Afriek is a socio-political mission, a bridging of cultural differences, represented in a fashion object. However, the consumer may interpret the object according to his or her own knowledge and experience and embed it in a different system of reference. Additionally, in wearing the garment, a dialogue emerges between consumer and object, in which the object assumes a role in the consumer’s personal identity project. Thus, the garment may end up serving a different project than Afriek intends it to.

Based on interviews with eleven Afriek consumers, this chapter discusses how Afriek’s consumers interpret and wear their Afriek garments and seeks to locate concurrences and frictions with Afriek’s representations. The chapter consists of three sections. The first section zooms in on the eleven consumers and locates them in a transnationalist context to establish a framework for their knowledge and experience. The second section analyses how these eleven consumers interpret their Afriek garments. To what extent do they share Afriek’s frame of reference, and at which points do their own knowledge and experiences come to the table? The third section illuminates experiences of wearing Afriek garments and questions how consumers engage with their garments in this process. Overall, this chapter gives an insight in the role of consumers in Afriek’s transnational project.\(^{148}\)

Flexible citizens

The eleven consumers of Afriek I interviewed between January and March 2019 differed in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. However, during the interviews, it became clear that they have two things in common. Firstly, they all belong to a middle or mid-high social class: they

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\(^{148}\) Afriek sold its products mostly through its website, but also physically in a number of retail spaces. Afriek organised several pop-up shops in Amsterdam, and sold their collection for a while at several multi-brand other stores in the city. Since 2017, Afriek has laid more emphasis on the market in Kigali. The company organised two pop-up shops in the city and nowadays sells its collections at the Go Kigali boutique in Kigali’s Marriott Hotel. The atelier in Kigali is also open to visits, but on the third floor of an office building, it can only be found if one knows where to look for it.
have relatively high incomes and most of them have enjoyed a university education. Secondly, the respondents are far from nation-bound. Consisting of a mixture of travellers, former refugees, expats and diasporans, this group of consumers represents a wide spectre of transnationalist figurations.\(^{149}\) Below, I will shortly characterise their transnational profiles.

Dutch consumers Bas (60), Margje (25) and Misha (20) could be characterised as fervent travellers. Bas and Margje are father and daughter. They live in the Netherlands permanently, although Margje spent six months in Sweden on a study exchange. Bas travels very regularly for his job as a tax consultant and lecturer in tax policy, both within and outside of Europe. Margje, who works for the Dutch government, likes to travel in her leisure time. So does Misha, a Dutch university student in Creative Business. Although at the time of our interview, he had not been travelling for a while, he did visit Asia for several months after his high school graduation.

Three other consumers living in the Netherlands have a more profoundly multinational profile. Two of them currently hold multiple passports: Economist Hervé (27) was born in Ivory Coast and lived in Kenya, France and Canada before moving to the Netherlands in 2016. Fashion designer Stéphane (45) is from France and moved to the Netherlands shortly after the turn of the millennium. He travelled intensively for several years. Finally, textile conservation student Lorena (31) has a multi-cultural background: she was born to a Dutch father and Mexican mother. Although she has lived in the Netherlands all her life, she has visited Mexico repeatedly in the past.

Of the five consumers living in Rwanda, three are expatriates: Thijs (32), Eliza (33) and Philippine (27). All three were all born outside of Rwanda and currently live in the country temporarily. Thijs was born in the Netherlands and owns a food processing company in the northern part of Rwanda. Eliza is American and has resided in multiple African countries as she and her partner own a tour company on the continent. Eliza is also the owner of Go Kigali boutique in Kigali, which sells Afriek garments. Philippine, finally, was born in France and works on a two-year contract at the French embassy in Kigali.

The two remaining consumers from Rwanda are former refugees. Contrary to other consumers, they were forced to move abroad as a consequence of political turmoil. Rita (29) is Rwandan-born, but left her native country for the United States in 2000. She returned in

\(^{149}\) These transnational beings should be taken seriously as signals of the current socioeconomic condition. Braidotti has argued that these figures are not mere metaphors of globalism but rather “figurations [...] materialistic mappings of situated, i.e. embedded and embodied, social positions [...] highly specific geopolitical and historic locations”. Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 4, 11.
2014 and now works in Rwanda as a brand consultant. Chris (34) was born in Burundi, grew up in Congo, and finally moved to Rwanda, where he is a successful photographer.

Their different trajectories notwithstanding, all the respondents answer to some extent to what Ong and Braidotti have called “flexible citizens”. For flexible citizens, mobility and flexibility define how they accumulate capital and social prestige and how they negotiate cultural meanings. This implies “a new mode of constructing identity, as well as new modes of subjectification that cut across political borders”.150 As Braidotti has argued, the idea of flexible citizenship “leads to the disconnection of the three elements of citizenship, nationality and national identity. These effects boil down to once central idea: the end of pure and steady identities”.151 The reading and wearing of Afriek garments by the eleven consumers introduced above should be seen against the background of such increasingly transnational patterns of knowledge, experience, consumption and identification.

Reading Afriek

How do consumers read and interpret the products made by Afriek? In chapter two, it became clear that Afriek’s products could be considered as hybrid objects that destabilise the idea of ‘African’ fabrics as well as ‘western’ silhouettes. However, in Afriek’s representations of the products, kitenge returns as an idée fixe of Africanity, geographically and historically rooted, and undeniably ‘other’: “Kitenge is an East African, West African and Central African fabric, often worn by women and wrapped around the chest or waist, over the head as a headscarf, or as a baby sling. We work with African print because it directly shows you the origin of the product.”152 This statement shrouds the dynamics of kitenge as outlined in chapter one. So described, kitenge becomes what Bhabha has called a ‘fetish object’, an object “prior to the perception of difference”, in other words, of which the internally different, dynamic character has not been recognised.153

In fact, Afriek uses a fabric that has become perceived as African, but is not African in origin. I have argued before that Sivan and Kars functioned as cultural mediators, marking kitenge as ‘originally’ or ‘authentically’ African and placing it in a western retail context. According to Sylvanus, cultural mediators such as Kars and Sivan cater to a specific western cosmopolitan clientele looking for novel and distinctive lifestyle objects.154 From Sylvanus’

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150 Ong, Flexible Citizens, 18.
151 Braidotti, Transpositions, 79.
152 Afriek, “FAQ”.
153 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 164.
perspective, such a cosmopolitan consumption of ‘difference authenticated’ amounts to a positioning of Africanity as a source of desirable, fashionable novelty. Remarkably, Sylvanus seems to assume that this image of Africanity is simply transferred onto consumers, who gladly accept and indulge in the idea of authenticity. But do they?

In the interviews I conducted with consumers of Afriek, I asked all consumers about their knowledge of Afriek’s products and the company’s conceptual approach to production. Most respondents said that they had looked at the company’s website, had followed Afriek on social media, or had talked directly to Kars or Sivan at one of Afriek’s pop-up shops. They were acquainted with the frame in which Afriek represents its products. During the interviews, consumers indeed nearly without exception referred to kitenge as ‘African fabric’ or ‘African print’, but when I asked for specific knowledge, their interpretation of this term was rarely as straight-forward as Sylvanus presumed.

Ivorian-born Hervé vividly remembered being surrounded by pagne, or kitenge, in his youth. In Ivory Coast, according to Hervé, “you see it everywhere; people from any level of society from the poorest to the wealthiest wear pagne. It is important in our culture and important in my family as well”. When asked how he interpreted Afriek’s clothes, Hervé answered: “As African fashion. It is in the textiles, the colours […] that immediately remind me of home […]. This mix of colours, you don’t see it in Europe or in other countries, it is very specific to our continent”. At the same time, Hervé acknowledged that pagne is not authentically or entirely African:

[coming from Africa for example I know there is a lot of fabric coming from China. This can be seen as a negative thing, but to be honest with you, in Abidjan, I don’t want to give numbers, but maybe fifty to seventy per cent of the people that you can see wearing African fashion are wearing something that comes from China. It also became part of the culture, you know. Not everyone can afford Vlisco.

Hervé demonstrated knowledge about the existence of Vlisco and about the ongoing transformation of pagne or kitenge culture in Africa, acknowledging the fluid nature of the material presented by Afriek as a signifier of Africanity.

As Hervé grew up on the African continent, his considerable knowledge of pagne’s social life is understandable. However, other respondents, even those without an African

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155 Interview with Hervé, January 25, 2019.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
background, also reflected substantial knowledge of African fabrics. For consumers born and raised in the Netherlands, this knowledge was probably predominantly induced by the presence of Vlisco in their country. Bas mentioned that his wife, and Margje’s mother, owns several garments made of Vlisco fabrics. Referring to kitenge in general, he said, “it is Dutch cloth. Or Chinese”. Similarly, Misha knew about the existence of Vlisco, although he could not remember the company’s name. “There is this Dutch textile factory that makes fabrics used as dowries in Africa… What are they called again?”

Expat Thijs, who is Dutch but has lived in Rwanda for several years, said about Afriek’s materials: “The fabrics are of course Vlisco, which is made in the Netherlands, and nowadays it’s increasingly China and India. In the end, it is not entirely African but focused on African culture and on what [Africans] like”. Although the kitenge fabrics used by Afriek were not Vlisco prints, Thijs’ knowledge of their connection to Vlisco and their cross-continental production show that he was well aware of the material’s transnational social history. His position as Dutch expat in Rwanda has granted him a double knowledge: of the cloth’s history in the Netherlands and of its circulation in Rwanda.

To some of the consumers, the cloth itself visually spoke of its transnational trajectories. Stéphane, an initial customer of Afriek who later started working for the brand as a fashion designer, described his initial attraction to the prints when he first visited an Afriek pop-up shop:

There is something about the choice of prints I saw that first time, which was really interesting. They weren’t those cliché African prints that you see too much of […] it had a feeling of beyond Africa. It had Asian influences […], it had a sort of more international flair to it.

Two things emerge from this statement. On the one hand, Stéphane could read the cloth’s social history from its materiality. This underlines the vibrancy of kitenge as the ability to speak of its social life to human beings directly. In this instance, kitenge spoke against Afriek’s designation of it as an African signifier.

On the other hand, Stéphane also recognised the mediating role of Sivan, Kars and Jolanda in the presentation of these fabrics as ‘African’: what he saw at that pop-up shop was a ‘choice of prints’, not a ‘true’ impression of African identity. In a similar observation,

158 Interview with Bas, January 25, 2019.
159 Interview with Misha, January 18, 2019.
160 Interview with Thijs, February 15, 2019.
161 Interview with Stéphane, March 23, 2019.
Rwandan brand consultant Rita pointed out that Afriek actively transforms the image of kitenge that is represented to its audience. Rita said:

One thing I like about their garments is yes, it’s African fabric, but it’s not typical. [...] They choose certain patterns that are very kitenge. And then there are others that have this crossover. It could just be a print, but it has this vibe of kitenge. [...] I’d say maybe it’s a more modern version of the kitenge, kitenge with a spin.

Thus, both Stéphane and Rita identified Afriek as a cultural mediator, although this recognition may also have been to some extent informed by their involvement with Afriek at a later stage. Nevertheless, other consumers, such as Hervé, Thijs, Bas and Misha, also alluded to Afriek’s mediating role by contrasting Afriek’s representation of kitenge with their own reading. Contrary to what Sylvanus has suggested, consumers did – and do – not take Afriek’s representation of Africanity for granted. Indeed, their representation unfixes kitenge as an African signifier, showing that and also how such signifiers are “appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew”.

To what extent did the same apply to the ‘western’ side of Afriek’s garments? Although Afriek’s web discourse does no longer refer to their designs as ‘strictly western’, the statement “kitenge is [...] worn by women and wrapped around the chest or waist, over the head as a headscarf, or as a baby sling”, implicates that Afriek introduces both tailored kitenge and kitenge menswear to the continent. As chapter one has demonstrated, this is not the case. Afriek contributes to already existing ways of wearing kitenge in Africa. As Rita asserted about her kitenge trench coat: “I love that this is a trench coat. Normally kitenge is like a headwrap, top, or a skirt that’s long, but I like that they play with it. That they give it different forms.”

Other respondents, in the Netherlands or in Rwanda, did not comment specifically on the garment types of their clothes as being specifically meaningful, which only underlines their universal appeal.

Although Afriek’s garments are presented as a combination of African prints and western silhouettes, the specific and transnationally situated knowledge and experiences of consumers unravel these signifiers of ‘Africanity’ and ‘western-ness’. Indeed, above interviews show multiple frictions between Afriek’s frame of reference and that of their

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162 Interview with Rita, February 11, 2019.
163 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.
164 Interview with Rita, February 11, 2019.
consumers, causing their interpretations to discord. As Bhabha said: “The act of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement.” Afriek’s garments themselves, but in these communicative frictions that processes of the fixing, unfixing and re-fixing of signifiers are articulated.

**Wearing Afriek**

How do Afriek’s consumers engage with their clothes in the process of wearing them? Wearing Afriek is a political choice, as the website underlines: “Every time we spend money, we are casting a vote for the kind of world we want […] When you wear Afriek you can be proud for what you’re wearing again, knowing where your garments come from and how they are made”. Afriek’s garments are intended to convey a sense of activism onto the wearer, who is expected to take pride in the cross-cultural and ethical aspects of Afriek’s garments. The role of kitenge is central in this project for Afriek: “The recognizability of the fabric instantly provokes conversation. And, obviously, it is beautiful in its depth and richness of the design.” Kitenge has a double connecting function, making products desirable for consumers and creating conversations with other people, spreading Afriek’s message.

With such a wide and diverse range of transnational subjects as consumers, Afriek’s garments are bound to serve a wide range of what Carol Tulloch has called *style narratives*. A style narrative is “the process of self-telling, that is, to expound an aspect of autobiography of oneself through the clothing choices an individual makes”.

Yet, consumers do not have full control over this process of ‘self-telling’. They are affected by the materiality of Afriek’s garments, particularly, kitenge, which was the primary point of reference for the respondents when they discussed the motivations for buying and wearing their Afriek garments and their experiences of wearing them. In this process of wearing, consciousness and desire, affect and effect weave into each other as the bodies of people meet with the vibrant matter that is cloth.

**Wearing politics?**

For most consumers, Afriek’s political business approach played to some extent into their motivation for buying their Afriek garment. For Rita, Afriek’s former brand ambassador who

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165 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 53.
167 Afriek, “FAQ”.
lives in Rwanda, Afriek’s political project was a primary motivation to buy her Afriek garments:

A reason that I fell in love with Afriek is that Sivan does a really great job at being conscious about partnering with these tailors and building a brand off of the back of a country’s narrative, or even style. […] I feel like a lot of brands fail to do that, this is where the whole cultural appropriation comes in, making money off of people’s stories without actually including them in that. […] I stand in solidarity with their project.¹⁶⁹

According to Rita, Afriek’s project was not reflected in the company’s practices, but also in the garments: “I think they are changing that narrative of ‘just because something is made in Africa it’s gonna be like, a grade below what the standard is’. You can expect premium quality.”¹⁷⁰

For Dutch-Mexican textile conservator Lorena, buying her Afriek trousers was a combination of aesthetic and ethical concerns. She narrated:

In Mexico, you see all those Indians in beautiful clothes that sometimes cost them weeks of work, and then they are bought up for a tiny price and sold in the United States for eight times the amount of money. I find that terrible. When Sivan explained how she did it, I thought, this is the right way to go.¹⁷¹

For Lorena, the trousers also reminded her of a more worldwide political situation which she had witnessed in person while travelling through Mexico. Again, this proves how consumers’ flexible citizenship informs their view on, and motivations for buying, Afriek.

The same counted for Ivorian-born Hervé, who also lives in the Netherlands. He said about his Afriek bomber jacket:

Everytime I wear it I feel like an ambassador. When I am wearing African fabric or African design, it is never random. I know that wearing this and being in Europe will bring ideas to people. […] I believe that what Afriek is doing is already a first step in communicating, sharing what is happening in the African continent here in Europe. Because there is not that many platforms. Fashion is a great thing, how many people today, if I was wearing my Afriek bomber,
Hervé refers to the potential of fashion to raise people’s curiosity, consciousness and knowledge. For Hervé, the interest in African fashion among European people “means being willing to travel there, being willing to discover more, to hear about the history, to meet some people, some other designers working on other stuff.” Several other customers pointed at the fact that their garments had started conversations about living and life in Africa, such as Stéphane: “I always get reactions. Sometimes people start conversations. It’s a way to talk about their experiences with Africa, whatever those are.”

For several consumers in the Netherlands, however, Afriek’s approach was not of particular importance. As Dutch tax consultant Bas stated: “I don’t buy garments because of their approach, I buy them because I like them.” Dutch student Misha said: “The story behind the garment for me is just an extra.” Thus, for some, Afriek’s garments were a purely aesthetic product. That does not make buying Afriek a less political action; both Bas and Misha were conscious of Afriek’s approach and their choice to buy Afriek reflected their support for cross-cultural collaboration and justified the quality of the products resulting from it. While their choices for buying Afriek were consciously political for some, for most consumers, wearing Afriek proved to be a more personal matter, related to individual style and identity.

**Wearing difference**

Dutch student Misha owns an Afriek jumpsuit made of red kitenge with small white and brown dots. In late 2017, he saw a picture of the jumpsuit online. Misha immediately liked it: “What I loved mostly was the design, a jumpsuit for men. […] I knew they existed, jumpsuits for men, but I’d never found one. Until I ran into this one, and it came in a great fabric, too.” The African aspect of the fabric was not really at issue for Misha: “I don’t really have a connection with Africa, it is really the piece itself that speaks to me.”

When I asked Misha how he experienced wearing the jumpsuit, Misha answered: “I quite like it when people look at me when I walk across the street. With this [jumpsuit], you
directly draw attention. That does make me very happy”.\(^{179}\) Misha receives many positive reactions on the jumpsuit, from his friends to people in the streets and at festivals. The garment clearly stands out and is primarily appreciated for its somewhat ‘different’ look. At the same time, the jumpsuit creates a belonging through difference, positive belonging in a Dutch fashion context. This for Misha is a source of pride rather than the story behind the garment.

Dutch government employee Margje got an Afriek bomber jacket in dark blue and red kitenge as a present for her twenty-third birthday. Margje learned about Afriek through her father, Bas: “He owned this bomber jacket and I thought, ah, that is really cool.”\(^{180}\) She started following Afriek on social media. What she liked about Afriek were “the patterns, a sense of the foreign – it feels a little more exotic”.\(^{181}\) She continued to explain: “My mother has two Vlisco dresses, I really like those, and I’ve also discovered a website that sells Asian clothing with different colours and patterns. It’s just something different than the usual”. About wearing the jacket, Margje said: “It always looks cool. A bomber jacket is always cool, and then with a crazy pattern like that…”\(^{182}\)

Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter have argued that “cool is an intrinsically positional good […] ultimately a form of distinction”.\(^{183}\) For Margje Afriek’s garments meant distinction-through-difference. Heath and Potter have connected the “restless quest for nonconformity” to a consumerist, capitalist logic.\(^{184}\) However, Margje’s choice of “exotic” clothing also reflected her sense of cultural identity: Margje asserted that she “identif[ied] a bit as a world citizen”.\(^{185}\) So did her father, Bas, who owns several Afriek blazers, a bomber jacket and a parka. Bas said:

The idea of world citizenship appeals to me. I travel a lot and I regularly buy clothes abroad, for example in China or India. In China I bought two wool sweaters from the brand Shanghai Teng, they make things in a somewhat Asian style, in a combination of wool and silk, and in India I had some things made. I also often stimulate my wife to buy Kenzo. All of this is a little bit exotic.\(^{186}\)

\(^{179}\) Interview with Misha, January 18, 2019.
\(^{180}\) Interview with Margje, January 26, 2019.
\(^{181}\) Ibid.
\(^{182}\) Ibid.
\(^{184}\) Ibid.
\(^{185}\) Interview with Margje, January 26, 2019.
\(^{186}\) Interview with Bas, January 25, 2019.
Through their ‘worldly’ taste in clothes, Bas and Margje express a sense of cosmopolitan identity, as Sylvanus suggested. This cosmopolitanism is defined by Jonathan Friedman as “shifting, participating in many worlds, without becoming part of them”.  

Sylvanus argues that these cosmopolitan consumers “are continuously in search of ‘authentic’ objects they consider to symbolize distinctive cultural expressions”; the cosmopolitan “decorates his life with distinguishing objects that he mixes and arranges according to his hybrid view of the world”. Indeed, Margje said: “Why not mix up a little? People in Africa probably love wearing Nike shoes, too.” Although Bas and Margje’s wearing of Afriek does not disrupt or destabilise ideas of cultural identity per se, their cosmopolitanism, and their Afriek garments as reflections of it, should be taken seriously as a figuration of a globalising world.

Remarkably, Lorena also mentioned that she felt like a world citizen in her Afriek trousers. During the interview, we discussed Lorena’s Mexican background. “I am proud of it, of being different, or at least that’s how I feel.” Lorena owns many Mexican garments, of which she said: “These are my power clothes. When I have something important, for school, I wear one of my Mexican huipiles and I think: okay, let’s do this. I feel a bit protected.” To Lorena, clothes are more than just an object that she surrounds herself with to construct her identity. “I dress after my power. I’m always concerned with it: not how the external world sees me, but more with how I feel.” Lorena strongly expressed the extent to which she felt affected by her clothes.

In wearing her Afriek trousers, Lorena said, “I feel very happy, and a bit exotic, and a bit different, a world citizen.” Lorena’s world-citizenship is not only associated with flexible accumulation, but also with a more flexible, open-ended identity. The ‘difference’ of the trousers enabled Lorena to engage with an embodied feeling of difference. The colourful and exotic look of the kitenge activates a nomadism in Lorena: she becomes not entirely Dutch, not entirely Mexican, not even African – but something else besides. Instead of changing her external relation to Africa, the trousers change something inside her body and mind: they raise her consciousness of being different within, of being a hybrid herself.

189 Interview with Margje, January 26, 2019.
190 Interview with Lorena, January 18, 2019.
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
Wearing the cross-cultural

To other consumers, the mixture of cultures materialised by Afriek directly mirrored their transnational and cross-cultural lives. Afriek garments proved particularly attractive to expats living in Rwanda. For Dutch entrepreneur Thijs, who lives in the north of the country, his Afriek blazer in ‘Eye’ print reflected his life and work:

I often say, you are what you wear to some extent, you change a little as a person, just a little bit. It is also a first impression people get from you when you speak to them. That is why I often wear [the blazer] when I am networking […] it helps with the story, about doing business in Rwanda. It does not necessarily identify you, but it does identify what you are doing.194

The same counted for Philippine. A French expat in Kigali, she translated her life in-between countries to her clothes: “I like the fact of mixing something I am used to wearing, with some kitenge”.195 For Philippine, it was this mixture of characteristics that attracted her to Afriek. She owns several Afriek garments: plain short sleeve T-shirts with kitenge pockets, and a bomber jacket. When I asked Philippine whether she ever bought other clothes in Rwanda, she answered in the negative, saying that “it [would] just fill up space”.196

According to Braidotti, the accumulation of commodities causes immobility, both physically and politically.197 Philippine’s statement both confirms and questions this argument. While she felt that some clothes indeed reduced her mobility, her kitenge clothes did not. About her Afriek garments, she added that “these clothing items also serve as a tangible memory of a time in my life”.198 Specific garments can mobilise the feeling of a past experience and make one ‘travel’ mentally, through space and time.

Stéphane, who would later become Afriek’s designer, felt the same about wearing his Afriek garments: “It kind of opens you up. It sounds maybe a bit corny, but it is kind of a way to travel. Maybe not physically, but in your world, in your mind, it opens you up to another culture.”199 Philippine and Stéphane’s conception of Afriek’s garment is rather nomadic: they induce a way of travelling without even physically moving. In the case of Stéphane, he felt that this kind of travelling could also be cross-cultural.

194 Interview with Thijs, February 15, 2019.
196 Ibid..
197 “I shop, therefore I am. This consumerist injunction saturates the social space with commodities, which results in immobility and sedentary accumulation. [...] It produces immobility in the sense of stasis due to accumulation of toxins in the mode of commodities”. Braidotti, Transpositions, 152.
199 Interview with Stéphane, March 23, 2019.
It was similar for Chris, the Burundian-born, Rwandan photographer, who said: “We live in a time where exchange is necessary. [...] It is okay to accept origin, and it is a pride to accept that you are going to another level where you are made of mixing and métissage. That is why Afriek to me just made sense”.200 Chris considers people as changeable and culture, or origins, as fluid. He recognised his Afriek bomber jacket as a product of multiple métissages, as a hybrid object. According to Bhabha, the hybrid object “breaks down the symmetry and duality between self/other, inside/outside,” introducing an affective, appreciative sense of otherness.201

The cross-cultural aspect of Afriek’s garments is important for many consumers with a transnational background. For some, it is primarily the coming-together of elements associated with different places and times in their lives that reflects their transnational identities, which is where the loosening of the screws of fixed identities begins. As in Garber’s theory of transvestism, they “[put] in question identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded, and ‘known’” – to consumers themselves, and to others.202 It is at this point that the hybridity of Afriek’s garments surfaces, and Braidotti’s statement that commodities merely cause stasis proves untenable.

Wearing Africanity
Finally, two consumers expressed that they wore Afriek because of the African character of the garments. About wearing her Afriek trench coat, Rita said: “I definitely feel like I’m wearing something that is African. That has the flair, the vibe of it [...] my style is definitely eclectic, but I’d say it’s rooted in African expression”.203 Wearing her Afriek garment was a way of underlining her African identity. In 2016, just after he had moved to the Netherlands, Ivorian-born Hervé bought an Afriek bomber jacket in bright red kitenge with a large white and blue paisley motif. “When I moved [to the Netherlands] it had been a year or two that I had not been in Ivory Coast and I wanted to buy some African fashion stuff, I wanted some pagne. It is something I love but I did not have the opportunity to go back [to Ivory Coast] and buy some.” His Afriek jacket activated an African belonging. “When I wear it”, he said, “I feel African. I do. I feel proud because I am wearing something that comes from there”.204

200 Interview with Chris, February 19, 2019.
201 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 165.
202 Garber, Vested Interests, 13.
203 Interview with Rita, February 2, 2019.
204 Interview with Hervé, January 25, 2019.
Apparently, while some consumers wear Afriek for its different or cross-cultural aspects, to Rita and Hervé, Afriek’s kitenge garments materialise important markers of African expression. While Afriek’s garments are mere fashion for some, they create feelings of African belonging for others. This contrast raises questions about the ‘hybrid’ view of the world that Afriek and several of its consumers uphold, in which clothes made of kitenge can be African and Dutch at the same time and in which ‘exchange’ and ‘mixing’ are normalised. Rita and Hervé, as Afriek consumers, already “stand in solidarity with [Afriek’s] project” and a view on the world based on open dialogue and cultural exchange. However, this might not be the case for everyone, as the fiery debates on cultural ownership in fashion indicate.

I felt that this thesis needed a third perspective from a group of people who are not necessarily acquainted with Afriek, but whose daily lives might be affected by the company’s practices; a group that felt this same sense of ‘African belonging’ through kitenge but who might comment otherwise on its widespread use among a white European population. For this purpose, I spoke to several members of the Rwandan diaspora in the Netherlands who wear kitenge in their daily lives. Cedric and Marie-Louise, a Dutch-Rwandan couple in their fifties, agreed that: “We wear [kitenge] to show where we come from. Our own identity, our own culture.” When I asked them what they thought of white Europeans wearing kitenge, Marie-Louise answered: “I think it looks nice! But also a bit bizarre. I’d say they were probably married to an African man or something.” Cedric said: “If would see a white person on the metro wearing kitenge, I would think it a little strange. Not bad. Just strange.” Fifty-five-year-old Giselle declared: “I think it looks beautiful. But you have to choose a colour that goes well with the colour of your skin.”

These comments stress that the wearing of kitenge garments by people of European ethnicity is not entirely uncontested – not even in the case of Afriek. Lorena was the only Afriek consumer who expressed some anxiety for being accused of cultural appropriation:

I chose [my print, yellow with small brown and white dots] because it looks a little less African, because I think it’s a little bit cultural appropriation. I feel a little guilty because it is not my culture. I feel the same way about my Mexican clothes: that is my culture and I feel very proud to wear it. But when I see other

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205 Interview with Cedric and Marie-Louise, April 9, 2019.
206 Ibid..
207 Ibid..
208 Interview with Giselle, April 24, 2019.
people wear it casually or without any idea behind it, I find that difficult, too.  

As Lorena points out, in encouragement of cultural exchange and hybridity, it must not be forgotten that kitenge to some is still an important marker of cultural identity. If the third term in the context of transvestism is a “deliciously destabilizing presence”, in the case of cultural cross-dressing, the question remains: delicious to whom?

The consumption of Afriek’s garments should be seen in the context of increasing transnationalism and increasingly transnationalist subjects. These subjects, as the interviews reflected, may have a different level of knowledge about Africa and African culture, including textiles. While Afriek may represent kitenge as ‘originally African’, consumers re-interpret kitenge according to their own knowledge about the material. From the interviews, it became clear that Afriek’s garments did not merely arouse an appreciation for African products, but that they also become entangled with people’s transnational lives, enabling the expression of cosmopolitan identities, engagement with internal differences and non-binary identifications. If these meanings and possibilities reflect the contemporary transnational autobiographies of consumers, they also constitute a new chapter to the biography of Afriek’s garments and the social life of kitenge cloth.

209 Interview with Lorena, January 18, 2019.
210 Garber, Vested Interests, 203.
In 2014, a year after the launch of their first blazer collection, Sivan and Kars received an e-mail from a representative of Vlisco. The collection, which was on sale on Afriek’s website, contained two copies of Vlisco wax prints. This was an infringement of Vlisco’s copyright. Since the explosive increase of the number of – mostly Chinese – Vlisco copies on the market for African prints across the continent, Vlisco has not only moved to the highest segment of the market, but has also installed a strict copyright policy and enforcement. Usually, the perpetrators – mostly African and Chinese textile companies – are difficult to trace, and many go unnoticed. Contrary to most of these companies, however, Afriek is very active online, which makes the company easy to find – and to prosecute. For a short while, Sivan and Kars attempted to negotiate with Vlisco, but the duo was eventually forced to remove the blazers from their website and were left with the threat that if they would use Vlisco copies again, they would be sued.

Vlisco’s approach is both understandable and remarkable. Realising that the company could not keep up with the downpour of cheaper, and sometimes good-quality prints, Vlisco’s move into the luxury segment of the market was a gasp for air in the overwhelming presence of China in Africa. Since 2007, the company has marketed itself with the slogan “the true original”, developing ever-more spectacular advertising campaigns and engaging in star collaborations with fashion designers. However, if anything became clear in the first chapter, there is no such thing as an ‘original’ wax print. The history of Vlisco is itself predicated on multiple cultural exchanges and appropriations. Moreover, what constitutes an ‘original’ print on the African markets is often contested: here, consumers do not adhere to the principles of western property law, but base their definitions of real, fake, good, bad, copy and authentic by means of their own procedures, such as sensory experience.211 As Bhabha argued, “the 'original' is never finished or complete in itself”.212

Back in 2014, complying to Vlisco’s copyright policies would have meant the end of Afriek. On the fabric markets in Rwanda and Uganda, Vlisco copies are ubiquitous, but nearly impossible to recognise among the plethora of prismatic prints. Although Vlisco

211 According to Sylvanus, consumers on the markets in Togo, where she conducted fieldwork, would in some cases ascribe value to the cloths by touching, smelling or licking it. Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation.
proposed to let Afriek check their market finds with the Vlisco archive, that was not an option. Sivan: “We were in Uganda three days to buy fabrics, and had no time to wait for answers from Vlisco. They have so many fabrics, it is impossible to check.” In short, it was quitting or taking the risk.

In the following years, rumours about Vlisco went around in the media suggesting that the company was financially in bad weather. Sivan: “We assumed that Vlisco was going bankrupt, or did not care anymore, or they were at least no longer paying attention, so we thought: we can just continue.” Afriek took the plunge. “The second men’s collection went fine, there was a little Vlisco in it, but they did not say anything. We did not have any problems either with the women’s collection. With the next men’s and womens collection, we had new prints and then, in July 2018, we got another mail.”

This time, Vlisco requested the removal of nearly half of Afriek’s collection from their website. Moreover, a long lawsuit followed in which the future of Afriek was to be decided. The case resulted in a considerable financial loss for Afriek, and the departure of Kars from the company by the end of the summer. Sivan remained determined to continue Afriek, but had to call off the production of its new collection in the winter of 2019. Since, she has been exploring alternative options to keep the atelier in Kigali – and the dozen of tailors working there, some on fixed contracts – in business. Among the options was a collection of T-shirts, printed with an unintended reference to Braidotti’s globally interconnected utopia: “We are all in this together”.

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In September 2016, Afriek reposted a photograph of Dutch Afropunk band Koffie on the company’s Instagram page [fig. 13]. The picture, which the band would use as their main publicity image for years to come, shows seven band members of various ethnicities. Four of them don Afriek shirts and blazers. Two others wear printed T-shirts, one black with tropical flowers, the other printed in a black-and-white motif of tiny figures framed in broad borders. The seventh member wears a black, velvety cardigan with embroidered sequin details.

Enticingly, this nonchalant picture of seven men captures multiple elements of this thesis in one single shot. At first sight, they look like a group of friends, united by their love for Afropunk, posing in their stage outfits perhaps, exuberant occasion-wear, colourful as the streets of Kigali, Accra, Abidjan. Exoticism? Maybe. A sense of African belonging? Who knows. And who can really know, in a time where one’s life trajectories, travels, displacements, experiences, become increasingly difficult to read from skin colour or clothes. As has been argued with Ong and Braidotti, identity can no longer be taken at face value – which became ardently clear in chapter three.
Upon looking longer, invisible lines begin to connect the band member’s outfits. The kaleidoscopic spiderweb pattern of the Afriek shirt on the right begins to rhyme with the diagonal lines of the T-shirt on the left, which, at a closer look, contains the tiny dots and crackles reminiscent of batik. The narrow strips across the pattern, themselves meshed into rows of little squares, reappear vertically aligned in the Afriek shirt worn by the band member below. The fragmentation of the strips has the visual effect of dazzling sequins. The two bright red Afriek blazers in the image cross a palette of otherwise toned-down colours, but their brightness does not just set them apart: the redness of their jackets highlights the dashes of pink that are the tropical flowers on the top band member’s T-shirt. The large, abstract prints of their blazers, all stripes, squares and circles, engage in play with the tropical flowers, with the sequined hearts and butterflies, the squares, ovals and sextagonals that cross these men’s chests.

These invisible lines, what do they do? Do they merge the band members into one, homogenous entity, muddling colours and skin tones? Do they nullify or amplify the Africanity of those kitenge shirts? Or does the fact that these lines are, after all, imaginary, merely emphasise that differences exist? Similar questions could be asked about a cross-cultural, transnational company such as Afriek, which has attempted to build a bridge between different cultures through fashion. This thesis has shed a light on the different actors involved with this project: the company’s material, its team, and its consumers. Their interactions have been analysed with Bhabha’s concepts of hybridity and Third Space in an attempt to locate moments where binary thinking about cultures was challenged by the intervention of a ‘third term’: a possibility, a position beyond the known and the expected.

The rhyming patterns of the band members’ outfits recaptures the first chapter of this thesis. Through an extensive material culture study of kitenge, it has been demonstrated that the fabric is far from ‘originally African’. Having travelled between Asia and Europe, Europe and Africa, Africa and Asia, it has been shaped by multiple cross-cultural encounters between humans and matter, its patterns vibrant assemblages of visual forms from across the world – from batik motifs to tropical flowers. In the second half of the twentieth century, kitenge, or pagne, has become firmly embedded in African culture; nowadays, there is no denying its relation to African identity. But like culture itself, it is internally different and subject to change. Always undulating, reverberating, changing form, kitenge denies ideas of stable origins and of static end products.

This chapter has also demonstrated that cloth in fact has a social life to narrate, a perspective, as it were, to speak from – an identity of its own. Previous studies already
marked that cloth, and clothes, can be affective and agentive through their material qualities, which also became clear in the struggles that Jolanda, Lisa and Stéphane experienced while working with the stiff materiality and dynamic patterns of the cloth. However, kitenge also affects both Afriek as company and its consumers as a material with a distinct cultural identity of its own: an identity that is not entirely unfixed, but certainly resists fixation.

The second chapter of this thesis zoomed in on Afriek as a company in the narrow sense, canvassing the cross-cultural interactions that Afriek gives rise to throughout its company practices. Afriek was built on the aim to counter the stereotypical view of Africa that prevailed in western media. Initially, this seemed to involve the simple turn of a negative image into a positive one, painted with the colours of kitenge and the graceful hand of non-hierarchic, non-discriminatory collaboration. In practice, Afriek opened up a space for engagement with different relations of power and various agencies which encountered each other in processes of fabric selection, design and garment construction, and in the company’s ethical policies. ‘The image of Africa’ gradually turned into an image of multiple Africanities, flowing into a displaced sense of western-ness and back.

The results of these processes were garments, objects hybrid not only for their being hybrids of hybridities – the transformative Africanity of kitenge and the disrupted western-ness of utilitarian silhouettes – but also because they had become inscribed with the cross-cultural negotiations among people and between people and material at the Afriek atelier in Kigali. However, in Afriek’s representations of their products, the Third Space that the company was becoming fell apart into binaries: African cloth versus western silhouettes, workmanship versus vision; and a seemingly assimilationist ethics.

In chapter three, however, it became clear that Afriek’s consumers do not simply take these representations for granted. While Sylvanus has argued that African print objects would be desired by cosmopolitan western consumers as “hybrid objects of exotica, requalified by cultural experts to fit to the demand of western consumption”, Sylvanus has overlooked the transnational knowledges and identities of these consumers, and had apparently not taken into consideration that these consumers might themselves be of African descent. Through their knowledge, these consumers recognised the process of requalification enacted by Afriek, which was outlined in chapter two. These consumers destabilise Afriek’s representations, but in doing so simultaneously contribute to the company’s project of bridging cultural differences by re-opening the negotiation of kitenge’s Africanity.

A venture into consumer’s motifs and experiences of wearing Afriek has shown kitenge’s ambivalent roles in consumer’s identity projects. While for some, kitenge is
difference-become-distinction, it is also connected to bodily experiences, personal memories, one’s cultural identity and place(s) in the world. For a group of transnational consumers, Afriek’s garments offer the possibility to express non-binary identities. At the same time, these garments sometimes activate differences within consumers themselves. It seems that, instead of directly and radically altering the image of Africa, Afriek’s garments underline the flexibility of today’s subjects and in some cases invigorate or initiate the opening up of identities to others – and bridge cultural differences as such.

What does this make of Afriek? This thesis has demonstrated that the fashion company, like the subject, can and must be decentred. In a time of affective subjects and the opening up of identities, the company can no longer be envisioned as a unitary entity bulldozing towards profit. Taking a closer look at the actual human beings and materials involved in the making of fashion and its meanings, two things become clear: first, that some processes, are not within a company’s power; second, by allowing encounters, frictions and negotiations between different actors, a bridging of cultural differences may become possible. Seen as such, a profit-making fashion company does more than selling difference; it may be a way to “grab the opportunities offered by the cultural intermixture already available [...] so as to create yet unknown possibilities for bonding and community building.”

The combination of material culture study, ethnographic fieldwork and philosophical theory has proved to be vital to this project. While material culture study and ethnographic fieldwork made the voices of Afriek’s multiple actors heard, philosophical theory and ethnography have enriched each other in a constructive dialogue that points out possibilities rather than problems. On a pragmatic level, the results of this research may be of value to Afriek and comparable fashion initiatives attempting to work cross-culturally. Hopefully, this thesis will spur further research into such companies and provoke more experience-based and critical research into companies in general, which is what an age of corporations needs.

Furthermore, research on Afriek has offered a valuable addition to existing academic debate on the history and wearing of African print fashion and textiles. First of all, it has shifted the geographical focus of this debate to East-Africa, challenging Eurocentric tendencies apparent in earlier literature. Secondly, it has charted a specific audience for African print clothes: today’s transnational subjects, whose fashion choices and experiences – particularly those of expats – generally deserve more attention. Finally, this thesis provides a general frame of reference for future research on the bridging of cultural differences and non-binary thinking through fashion – whether at the level of international relations or personal, (multi)cultural identities.
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